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This thesis consists of the first three chapters of a novel, the working title of which is Trying to Reach a Hundred with You. It is the story of Larry Zachary Brian, twenty-three, a community college dropout, resident of Portland, Oregon, whose only ambition has become to fall out of love with one woman and in love with another.

TRYING TO REACH A HUNDRED WITH YOU

by

Julian L. Aaron

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Approved by

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## APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Julian L. Aaron has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## CHAPTER I

A few years ago Rachel and I started making bro-sis pacts. If I had kids first, she'd move to wherever I was; if she had kids first, I to wherever she was. When I got married, she'd be my best man; when she got married, I'd be her maid of honor. When we made those pacts—I was twenty-one, she twenty-five—Rach said, “You do know this gives me like a year max to become a man and move back to Oregon, right?” because there was no doubt in her mind that sooner or later—but most likely sooner—I'd marry and have kids with Lily Wellington, despite my having recently told Rach on a Serious Talk Sunday that Lil and I thought marriage a next-logical-step sorta thing for people afraid of dying alone. But it wasn't like Rach didn't have evidence to back her up.

Lil was my elementary- and middle-school crush (not to mention best friend), my high-school sweetheart, my first love. And after our high-school graduation ceremony—another dumb formality, we agreed, and so skipped—the two of us moved from Pumpkinville to Portland together, enrolled at Cascadia Community College as Journalism majors together, rented a one-bedroom apartment together, and got part-time jobs together at Come & Pet It, the pet store down the block. We even started saying stuff like (me) “I can't imagine ever falling in love with anyone else” and (her) “If we ever had kids you'd for sure be the strict dad.” “Yeah, Lil? and that'd make you . . . ?” “The chill mom they come to for love advice and stuff. Duh.”

So yes, all signs pointed to marriage and children.

But two and a half years later Rach was still living in Brooklyn, now in her fifth year as a sixth-grade teacher, Lil was still in North Portland, now in her second year as a journalism major, and I was in Northwest Portland, now in my first year as a food stamps recipient, community college dropout, and, accidental eavesdropping on my landlord's daughter revealed, "the sad, tall man living in the basement." By that point I'd lost track of how well Lily was doing, but I knew things weren't going so well for me, and as for Rach, well, she didn't have much of a love life, which meant to her she didn't have much hope of having the children she so badly wanted anytime soon, but work couldn't have been better. In addition to teaching, she'd been helping to implement computer-programming curricula in New York City public schools, getting paid to show other teachers how to teach code and whatnot; and she even appeared on the front page of the *Sunday Times* recently, a huge once-in-a-lifetime deal for a teacher.

When I saw the article, I swear I wanted to feel happy for her and give her the props she deserved. I'd taken a picture of Lily and me out of the frame I meant to put "Teaching Future Generations to Crack the Code" in and then FedEx it to her, but I couldn't—just couldn't. All I could do—all I did—was skim through the article in search of her part, read the tiny paragraph way at the bottom that briefly mentioned her involvement in the pilot program, drop the paper on my cluttered coffee table, and then, being the bad brother/best friend I'd become, dodge her Gchat messages.

R: u read it or what?

R: mom and dad say u haven't been returning their calls.

R: ur silent treatment isn't fair, larry. c'mon, man, say something.

Our family's Jewish, but unlike other Jewish families, we never observed the Friday-night-to-Saturday-night Sabbath. Our day of worship was always Sunday. We weren't skullcap-wearing, Temple-Beth-Israel-attending Jews. What we worshipped on Sunday had nothing to with God, the Talmud, the Bible (Old Testament or New), but rather Serious Talk.

We'd moved from the Big Apple to the Small Pumpkin when we were kids. Pumpkinville's a believers' haven in Oregon, America's least religiously affiliated state per capita: 33% Evangelical, 24% Catholic, 13% Mormon, and—8, our family plus the Silversteins, Pumpkinville's one other ethnically Jewish family, divided by 2,226, population of Pumpkinville, times 100—0.36% Secular Jewish. It didn't take long for Rach to 1) figure out that her new friends couldn't stay for breakfast after Saturday-night slumber parties, and 2) ask Dad what they did at church exactly.

Dad: They have serious talks about life.

Rach: Why can't we have serious talks about life?

And so began the tradition.

Every Sunday morning, while our friends and neighbors sat and sang in the pews, we gathered around the kitchen island, ate cream-cheesed bagels, and had Serious Talks, during which Dad often read to us from the Gospel According to Flaubert, Neruda, Dostoevsky, Bellow, Roth, Campbell, and so on. This last one,



Joseph Campbell—the Power of Myth guy whose life’s work involved finding the similarities rather than the differences among religions—that’s the guy he’d picked up the “follow your bliss” stuff from. He often asked Rach and me what our bliss was, what made us truly happy. I’d mention something like Mario Kart or BB guns or the jokes on popsicle sticks, Rach the violin or buttered toast or Bloody Mary mix (only on airplanes), and Dad would tell us to write these things down, make a Bliss List to consult when we lost track of our “purpose in life” and needed redirection. Once I asked him if he had a Bliss List. He did, but it was private. He said, “You know what your grandmother’s last words were? ‘Why’d I spend my entire life doing everything I didn’t want to do?’”

Sometimes, though, we weren’t ready to have the Serious Talk that needed to be had, and when this happened, we’d avoid the kitchen—our church—hole up in our rooms, or take long walks through the woods behind our house (always in separate directions though), which back then wasn’t ever an issue; we lived in the same house; we could both keep to ourselves and keep an eye on one another. But once Rach and I’d moved out, this was no longer the case. After my breakup with Lily, for instance, I stopped returning their emails, texts, and calls; I knew I owed them more than superficial keeping-in-touch updates but wasn’t in the right state of mind to go there, and so instead I just went self-protectively silent, didn’t even send them vague messages saying “going through a rough patch” or “I’m alive, no worries, will get in touch soon.” But because I was so unhappy that I felt truly ill or injured inside, and as a result completely self-absorbed, self-centered, self-everything—all

self all the time, *self self self self self self*—I didn't consider how my absence might worry them.

The Saturday after the *Times* piece ran and I turned a negligent eye on Rach's Gchat messages about my silent treatment, she bombarded me with guilt-inducing prods ("Dad drinks too much when he's worried about u," "I want my best friend back," etc.) that she knew I couldn't ignore. I texted back. I was sorry, it wasn't personal, I'd fallen into shut-down mode again, and no, nothing new, still lonely, still trying to get through the days, still waiting for it to pass, just more of the same, and no, no new eye-opening wisdom from my therapist (who, I didn't mention, had grown so bored with my stasis that she no longer even tried to stifle her yawns while I reiterated for the thousandth time that I was certain I'd lost my soul mate, my one chance at happiness). Rach, also tired of humoring what she called "self-inflicted paralysis," quickly moved into problem-solving mode:

R: u should start dating again.

L: Yeah like who? I'm home all day. I meet nobody.

R: what about dog walking? i'm sure u see cute girls at the dog park.

L: There's one cute girl, but she lets her Shiba Inu lick the inside of her mouth.

L: Can't be messin' with that.

R: dating site?

L: I abhor the idea. C'mon, you know that.

R: i abhor the word abhor.

R: join us 21<sup>st</sup> century folk doing the best we can w/ what we got.

L: You're on the brink of invoking the word zeitgeist or some shit. I can feel it.

R: how bout u draft an "about me" profile and then have me look at it?

R: and be honest, the true version of urself.

L: I'll keep you abreast.

R: abreast = 🙄

I'd always had a stubborn, defiant streak in me. As a general rule I resisted advice—especially unsolicited—from just about everyone (why does everyone assume I haven't already thought of what they're telling me?), but I trusted Rach, and felt I should at least show a willingness to *move on*, for her sake, to put her mind at ease. So I opened a Word doc and gave it a go—*About Me: My name's Lawrence Zachary Brian. I don't like it when people call me Zach or Brian. I prefer Larry or (nickname) Love. Actually, better just call me Larry*—and then, suffering from self-glorifier's block, stared at the screen till I gave up and decided to see a movie.

There was Regal Cinemas just three blocks from my apartment, but it was Saturday night; I didn't want to run the risk of seeing someone I knew. So I rode my bike two and half miles to Firehouse Cinema, on Division Street, chained it up, pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head to hide my face, and then stood in line behind couple after couple after couple. Then another couple, arms locked, got in line behind me. To make them think I was waiting on someone, I took out my phone, wrote a text that said "Beat me here? In line now," and sent it to myself. The couple in front of me approached the ticket booth. "*Rio 2*," said the man. Pathetic, I

thought—two *adults* going to see a computer-animated *kid* movie. They took their tickets. I stepped forward.

“Larry? The fuck you doing here?”

Hannah Silverstein, an old friend of my sister’s, the one I had a little thing for back in middle school, whom I hadn’t seen in one, maybe two years, was standing next to me. Alone.

“Yo, what up?” I said.

Hannah hugged me.

The guy behind the glass wasn’t having it. “Sir?”

Then Hannah: “Go ’head.”

So I leaned down, sustained a hesitant “Uhhhhh” till I was out of breath and Bow-tie Ticket-Booth Boy emphatically cleared his throat.

“*Blue Is the Warmest Color*,” I said.

“How many?”

I looked at Hannah, back at Bow Tie. “Two please.”

To do as Rach had said—*be honest . . . the true version of urself*—I’d need to go home, erase my draft, and put: *About Me: I hate myself. Wouldn’t you? Broke, hardly employed, spending twenty-five bucks to see a semi-pornographic artsy fartsy French film all by yourself. On a Saturday night no less.*

“My date’s choice,” I told Hannah.

“Lily?”

“Nah. We’re not together anymore.”

“Whoa, you two were like the high-school sweethearts of all high-school sweethearts. Well if it’s any consolation, Doug and I broke up, *again*. Pretty sure for”—she held up four fingers—“*ever* this time.”

“Doug *Fenton*? Wasn’t he like—”

“I know, I know, no need to say it.”

“You’re not going to see *Rio 2*, are you?”

“Hope not. Waiting on a date. Says he likes to get to the theater, and *then* pick something that”—she made non-traditional quotation-mark bunny ears with her thumbs and index fingers—“suits his mood. Bad sign?”

“Depends on what you’re looking for, I guess. Listen, I gotta shoot across the street right quick. Munchies run. Ten-dollar box of Sour Patch Kids”—I pointed inside—“*not* kosher. But we should hang out sometime.”

I gave Hannah my number and told her to text me hers.

By the time I got to 7-Eleven, she’d followed through: “Hannah banana’s #.” Then, from inside the store, I watched her check her phone, look up the block, check her phone, look up the block, check her phone again—but for longer this time—and then buy tickets and go inside. That’s when I did something I’d never done before, followed by something I’d been doing way too much lately. I returned my two tickets, which was a huge pain in the ass—

Me: What do you mean, *what did I find unsatisfactory about my experience?*

Bow Tie: I have to fill out a form. It’s my job.

Me: But the movie hasn't even started. I haven't even gone in there.

Bow Tie: Well I can't refund your money unless you found the theater unsatisfactory. But I can give you emergency tickets.

Me: Emergency tickets? When is seeing a movie ever an emergency?

Bow Tie: They call them that because it's what we give people when there's an emergency in the theater,

like when the projector malfunctions or there's a fire or something.

Me: Wouldn't both those things make the theater unsatisfactory?

Bow Tie: No. They're accidents.

Me: But when the theater leaves a customer unsatisfied, that's on purpose?

Bow Tie: Would you like the emergency tickets?

Me: I want my money back.

Bow Tie: Can't do it.

Me: Then I want to speak to a manager.

—and then I went back to 7-Eleven and spent the entirety of my refund on miniature bottles of Sutter Home merlot, blueberry-flavored blunt wraps, and off-brand mac and cheese.

Four *Simpsons* reruns, three mini merlots, and two pencil-thick blunts later, my phone vibrated, and even though there'd been complete radio silence between Lil

and me for about six months (her choice), the first thing that came to mind, as always, was *It might be her, please let it be her*. But—as always—it wasn't, which made me feel both stupid and sad—as always. The text came from a nameless number, and since I was under the stupefying influence of effective wine and weed and defective antidepressants, it took me too long to realize who it was, thereby prolonging my *let-it-be-her* hope and intensifying my stupid-sadness.

503-334-8764

ME

Where you go? I saw blue.

I was the only one in there.

Date bailed.

Only one?

I thought . . .

Date bailed too. Stayed anyway.

Made it through like half. Whatcha doin?

Drinkin, smokin, straight west coastin.

Waiting for SNL.

Wanna come watch?

Yes please.

I wanted to cheer her up but knew I didn't have much talking or joking in me.

And so, taking Rach's advice out of context, I did the best I could with what I had: I

set out an unopened bottle of Sutter Home, a Mason jar full of iced water, a freshly rolled blunt, and a clean ashtray on a cleared-out section of the coffee table—all for her, and all of which she seemed to enjoy, except for the weed. It was “bammer,” she said, and then produced from her purse a test tube holding a plump jay.

“Remember you used to cop from me back in high school?”

“Uh, *yeah*. You always came through with the legit strands. Himalayan Hurricane, Turkish Tornado, El Niño Diablo.”

Clouds of smoke and wisps of saliva flew out of her mouth as she busted up laughing.

“What?” I said.

“Dude, marketing.” She puffed twice. “But this”—she passed it over—“is KKK. Supremely white supremacist herbals.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Try it before you knock it,” she said. “Those Pumpkinville rednecks, generation after generation of farmers. It’s like in their DNA. Kim Karkrashian Kush. THC crystals be *shining bright like a diamond*.”

“That’s Rihanna,” I said.

“Yeah, I know. Anyway, it’s just weed. It’s all just weed.”

Our night together was short, quiet, and comfortably uneventful. We drank, smoked, popped a couple of old Lorazepams, ate mac and cheese, watched *Saturday Night Live*, and then passed out next to each other on the couch (didn’t even make it to *Weekend Update*).



The next morning, however, *was* eventful. I woke up with a leg hanging over the couch and Hannah's arm draped over my side. I turned around. We were face to face. She opened her eyes and said, "What? Did I drool?"

"No," I said. "Uh, is this weird?"

She kissed me, or rather pushed her lips against mine and then pulled her head back against the couch—there was no conclusive smacking sound. "Now it is," she said.

I didn't say anything. I pushed my lips against hers. We made out some, although with only a few modest tongue touches here and there.

"What's the female equivalent of the morning wood?" she asked me.

"Oh, shit," I said, and tried to position myself so that I wasn't boring into her hip.

"It's fine," she said. "Grab a jimmy hat."

I'd never heard a girl call it that. "Be right back," I said, and then hightailed it to my sock, desk, and bedside-table drawers; then to the bathroom, the medicine cabinet, under the sink, and even into my purple Crown Royal satchel stuffed with mini shampoos and conditioners taken from hotels. All in vain. Of course. Who was I kidding? By age fifteen I'd amassed a cache of condoms from Lewis & Clark High's student health center, but Lily's mom had put her on the pill years before we started having sex; I'd never had the opportunity to put them to good use. By age sixteen, I'd turned them into water balloons to chuck at the squirrels that'd been chewing up my mom's bird feeder. There was that time, however, just a few months after Lily

had left me, when I decided to stock up again in an effort to symbolize my determination to get over her.

Waiting for the pharmacist at Walgreens to fill my Wellbutrin prescription, I went to the contraceptive section, ironically placed next to the diapers and baby formulas. But instead of swiftly picking a box and jetting, I just stood there like a pitiful doofus, staring at the wide-ranging ribbed patterns and vibrating rings for “her pleasure,” the ultra-thin high-sensitivity designs for “his pleasure,” and I couldn’t help equating “her” with Lil and “his” with Brad, who, she’d claimed, had nothing to do with our demise (“Larry,” she’d said, “you’re doing that thing again.” “What thing, Lil?” “The paranoid thing of when you don’t see what’s what”). We’d agreed to be friends, but it didn’t take long for me to realize that it’d be impossible to be friends with someone I was still in love with, and anyway, why the fuck would I want to be friends with someone who treated me like a shit-skid on a toilet bowl that gets pissed at till it disappears? So I tried to hate her guts, but it was easier thought than done. I walked away, grabbed a value-pack of vitamin-C gummy bears, my month-supply of antidepressants, and got the hell outta there.

Kicking myself for not getting condoms that day at the pharmacy, I sulked back to the living room, where Hannah lay naked on the couch. Soft, empty-handed, and embarrassed, I plopped down next to her.

“No luck,” I said.

“No worries.” She bent over to grab her panties off the floor. Standing to put her jeans on, she caught me too-blatantly admiring her legs.

"Sorry," I said.

"What for?"

"Lily hated it when . . ."—I looked away and fiddled with the plates and cups on the coffee table as if tidying up—"You like Irwin Shaw?"

"Who?"

"Never mind."

Hannah stooped, craned her head toward me, gave me a chance to go on, and then said, "How long ago you two break up?"

"We didn't."

"What? I thought you said—"

"That's not what I mean, we're not together, but it wasn't exactly—"

"Mutual?"

"What about you and Doug?"

"What about me and Doug? Was it mutual? Which time?"

"Which time what? I'm confused. Maybe this was a bad idea."

Hannah squinted, cocked her head, and—I guessed—waited for me to define *this*; and when I didn't, she went wide-eyed, which told me she'd decided that *this* meant all this: last night, especially this morning, her. That's not what I'd meant, though. Not what I'd thought. Not at all. But I didn't say it, and now a pang of sadness crossed her face. Just like that, it felt too late to say "I meant talking about our exes."

During the past eight months, Rach had repeatedly advised me to give it time, lots of time, months, years even, always in the form of some platitude or other handed down from Dad (*it'll happen when it happens, this too shall pass, one day at a time*), and even though I knew she was only trying to help, she often said such things at my weakest moments, and I'd lash out at her. "What do you mean months? years? How many months? How many years? It'll happen when it happens? What's *it*? When will it happen? Oh really, this too shall pass? Will *this too shall pass* when *this too* is good and I don't want it to pass? What a dumb thing to say." Then I'd calm down, muster the humility to apologize, regain some self-control, and tell myself, *She's right: days don't matter, weeks don't matter. Months matter, years matter.* But then this—*this* now being that insulted look on Hannah's face—this proved her wrong. Years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes—they didn't matter. Seconds mattered, because seconds made the difference between clarifying what "a bad idea" meant and letting Hannah jump to conclusions, both false and painful. Seconds. Only seconds.

I snatched the paper from under a pile of coupon pamphlets, and said, "You saw Rach was in the *Sunday Times* last week? Check it out."

Hannah's lips moved as she read. "It's bat-shit Looney Tunes, isn't it?" she said once she'd finished.

"What is?"

“That your sister’s dating a multi-millionaire.” She pointed to the color photo of Rach and a brown-skinned man hovering over a group of students who were, according to the caption, “learning to master HTML.”

“Dating like *dating* dating? Or like, you know, *dating*?”

“I don’t know. I wrote her a super long burdeny email a few weeks ago and am still waiting to hear back.”

“He made all that money with the code site?”

“Dude, didn’t you read it? With AlgoLove. When it went IPO or whatever he made major bank, and now he’s pouring it all into ProgramOurFuture.org.”

“Ah, that’s right. Yo, you got plans today? Wanna do something?”

“Uhhhhh, yeah, but I gotta go feed Doug’s ferret.”

I thought it strange the way she blithely mentioned doing something for Doug. It was over. Why take care of his pet? But it wasn’t any of my business to ask.

“Doug *would* have a ferret,” I said, and left it at that.

“Anyway, I gotta do that, and I should shower and stuff.”

“Yeah, that reminds me,” I said, “I have to take care of Ms. Humphry’s dog today. Movie later?”

“Whose dog?”

“A woman I work for. I walk dogs. I’m a dog walker.”

“You got a business card?”

“It’s temporary.”

“Walk poochies to your heart’s desire, I say. I got no problem with that. So what movie you have in mind, bub?”

“I still sorta wanna see *Blue*.”

“Not happening, dude. It’s bad. Real bad. Like get-your-money-back bad.”

“You got your money back?”

“Uh, *yeah*. *Hello*, c’mon, the unsatisfied customer rule. Told the guy the theater was too cold and *boom*, done deal, cash in the bank.”

“What else is playing?”

“I don’t know. Check the times and text me a few options. Anything that’s *not* close-up after close-up of a famished nympho Frenchie chowin' down on pasta and poon for three fuckin' hours.” She grabbed her purse and went to the door. “Stay gold, Pony Boy.”

A few minutes later I opened my Gmail account hoping to catch Rach online. Her Gchat icon was grayed out, but that didn’t fool me.

L: You think I don’t know about the invisible setting?

L: So you and the code guy are a thing . . . I wanna hear about it . . .

L: Sis, you there or what?

Leaving my Gmail open, I hit command-T and went to ProgramOurFuture.org. I read the About the Founder bio, learned nothing new, tried one of the coding exercises, got stupid bored stupid fast, hit command-T again, went to AlgoLove.com, and there, even though I knew it wasn’t *healthy*, searched for Lily Wellington (four

appeared; not one *my* Lily) and then Hannah Silverstein (five total, one of whom was, well, not *my* Hannah—I'm not crazy—but yeah, Hannah Banana Hannah). I clicked on the profile picture, a goofy sepia-toned image of her eating a caramelized apple, and then, *surprise, surprise*, got redirected to a page with two options: [AlgoLog In](#) and [Create an AlgoAccount Here](#). The only page open to non-members was the Dear AlgoAbby blog. I had to see if this was what I thought it was, because how bat-shit would it be not only if algorithmically produced love advice existed but people actually sought and trusted that shit? And so I read the most recent entry.

There I found something I wasn't expecting at all, something that—I mean if it was who or what I thought—was just as outrageous but much more disturbing than a computer-generated response to a human-generated letter; something that, in this order, entertained me, enlightened me, and, finally, infuriated me.

Said post, dated a little over a week earlier:

Miss AlgoAbby—

Some necessary info: I'm 28. I lost my virginity 6 years ago to a stranger while black-out D. After that I didn't have sex till a year later when I met my ex-but-not-really-it's-complicated-boyfriend (who from here on out I'll refer to as XB). Embarrassing confession: I never had an orgasm w/ XB & my flesh box burned & puffed up like a roasted marshmallow pretty much every time we did it, esp. when my hymenal remnants were inflamed, like I was allergic to him or something, & for some reason (most likely not

wanting to disappoint him + insecurity + emotional fragility), I never said no or told him to stop or even asked him to hurry up.

Anyway, me & XB have been off & on for give or take 3 years w/ this last offness stretch now entering month #3. During this time XB's facebook status has gone from "in a relationship" to "single" & then a whopping 8 days later right back to "in a relationship." I get it, it's over, & I know I should start dating again, but to be perfectly honest I don't really want to & at the same time I'm super lonely & know it's not healthy to be lonely or alone (or are they the same thing?), but it's not like feeling lonely is new to me. I mean, I wasn't *alone* per se w/ XB but I was almost always *lonely*. He's a super successful (= dude stacks bank) engineer & has no problem connecting smarty-pants math dots I never could & yet he always got frustrated w/ me for not knowing about electrode potential & fluid physics & half-lives, & eventually whenever I asked "Whatcha workin on?" he'd say "You wouldn't get it." And it's not like I ever made him feel like a dumbass or stopped helping him connect the emotion dots that he couldn't ever connect himself for the half-life of him, like why talking about how brilliant his new female coworker was made me feel super insecure & kinda jealous, or why I thought there was beauty in my jealousy (I didn't ever get territorial like a mouth-frothing jersey shorite or anything, just quiet & worried he'd think she was better than me & fall in love w/ her).

But now I'm on algo love. I met a guy & messaged back & forth w/ him for weeks before I finally grew a pair & went out w/ him. The guy (33, phd in philosophy, enormous EITHER/OR something something tattoo on



his shoulder he attributes to kierkegaard, salty and snarky at parties, neck beard but otherwise good looking enough) came over after the date & we did the making out & some naked petting till like 5am but NO sex. I could've been straight w/ him & said I'm a pro-sex feminist who doesn't enjoy sex, but instead I just got all weird & prudish & kept saying "Not so fast" & "Let's get to know each other first" like a nervy middle school chickenhead. Then he asked me why I put "Seeking casual encounters" on my profile & I said "That doesn't mean I don't want fulfilling sex" & he said "What's your definition of fulfilling sex?" & I said "What's yours?" & he (not a smooth operator) said "Anything but missionary."

It was super awkward when he left but that didn't stop him from messaging me a few days later to see if I wanted to hang out again. But I don't know what fulfilling sex is, if it means making love, or . . . I don't even know if I was ever in love w/ XB, or if I know what love is, or if it's normal to feel so alone right now, or if it's possible to be alone but not lonely. This is probably too long & too complicated w/ too many (unanswerable?) questions, I know. So maybe you could just give me some advice on what I should do about Neck Beard?

w/ explosive but heartfelt verbal diarrhea,

Pro-Sex Prudence

Dear Pro-Sex Prudence,

Just under a year ago I too went through a breakup with a guy (XB2) whom I'd dated for five years, and I too felt lonelier in the relationship than out of it, and I too felt he didn't get me, and I too felt he stopped trying to get me, and I too tried to help him see what'd led to our diverging paths, and the more I tried to figure these things out with him, the more I realized that his failure or disinclination or whatever it was to confront and talk through these painful truths was what made me so lonely, which loneliness led me to spend a lot of time with, and eventually catch serious feelings for, a close friend who not only seemed to get me but who *wanted* to get me, who saw love as an action performed by the lover rather than a feeling that seizes the lover. The open talks I had with this friend, compared to the dishonest talks I'd been having with my then-boyfriend, made me realize just how incompatible XB2's and my spirits were, and then, when my feelings for this friend evolved into a fierce, wholehearted love, I even began to question whether I'd ever been in love with XB2. I felt this way for almost an entire year and knew the whole time that deep down I didn't want to be with him anymore. But, because I was so afraid of devastating him, I made the mistake of neglecting to follow my bliss, which meant allowing XB2 to persuade me to put off our decision to break up, and to take a break instead, causing me immense confusion and self doubt. (Here I'm going to request that you indulge me while I sum up the rest of the story by showing how, shortly after our trial break, I reasoned my way through Facebook's ten Relationship Status options).

So was I (1) *Single*? No, because we hadn't technically broken up. What about (2) *In a Relationship*? Well, we were partially in, partially out, so no, and (3) *In an Open Relationship* wasn't right because "seeing other people" hadn't ever come up. The next one, (4) *Separated*, felt accurate, but I knew the word's connotation. I forged through the next five—we weren't (5) *Engaged* or (6) *Married* or (7) *In a Civil Union* or (thank God!) (8) *Divorced*, and although XB2 had sent me texts and emails saying he felt like he was dying, he wasn't really dead, which ruled out anything literally or figuratively close to (9) *Widowed*—bringing me to the tenth and final option, the only possible option, for me, for you, for everyone: (10) *It's Complicated*.

If you don't think it's complicated, you're at best simpleminded or willfully oblivious, at worst catatonic or sociopathic. If you don't think it's complicated, how can you say you're feeling and thinking? Your Relationship Status doesn't matter, doesn't *mean* anything, doesn't clarify or describe how you feel. You could be *In a Relationship*, *Married*, or *Widowed*, but if you think this indicates whether or not you feel lonely, then an understanding of the emotional vagaries and vicissitudes you're constantly going through at any stage of any relationship is, I'm afraid, lost on you, and is likely what's causing you to concentrate on trying to figure out what's *normal* instead of what's true to you.

My dear Pro-Sex Prudence, do you want to be with someone who can't connect the complicated love dots with you? Do you want to see if Neck Beard can? It's up to you to answer these questions. In the meantime, remind yourself that there's nothing wrong with being pro-sex and not

enjoying sex, nor is there anything wrong with being complicated, because it is and forever will be, even when you finally choose to follow your bliss.

Your humble servant,

AlgoAbby

I found Pro-Sex Prudence's letter to AlgoAbby by turns hilarious (Neck Beard! hymenal remnants!) and insightful (the beauty in jealousy). Its emotional frankness in the Serious-Talk spirit impressed me, too, and in a lot of ways I felt her pain and confusion, so much so, in fact, that I wanted to reach out to her—not to offer condescending advice, as if I had any to give—but to say, "Hey, you're not alone in all this."

But then I got sidetracked by AlgoAbby's response, whose story struck me as both self-indulgent and, taking my dot-connecting abilities to be more advanced than XB's, so self-serving, so wrong (as in immoral and incorrect) in so many ways that whatever urge I'd felt to find a way to reach out to Pro-Sex Prudence was now eclipsed by the overwhelming urge to stand up for myself and set the record straight. But first things first: I needed to confirm my suspicion.

Back in Gchat, I sent "I need to talk to you!!!" to Rach, and this time she responded:

R: sorry, in a loud au bon pain at penn station.

R: heading to d.c. for the night, what up?

L: Tell me, Rach, is Lil AlgoAbby? Did you help her get the job?

L: (I ran into Hannah Silverstein last night, she told me about the code guy.)

R: yes, i put her in touch with “the code guy.” ben’s his name btw. does it matter?

R: does this mean u’re on algoLove? u make a profile and not show me?

L: No it doesn’t and no I didn’t and yes it most certainly does matter!!!

R: she broke up w/ u, not the whole family. she’s still my friend.

L: Your loyalty should be to me, Rach.

R: u think I betrayed you? why u making such a big deal about this?

L: Have you read her most recent AlgoAbby post?

R: not yet.

L: Read it and you’ll see why: [blog.algoLove.com/index/page/2](http://blog.algoLove.com/index/page/2)

R: k, hold on a sec . . .

Restless, I fished around the ashtray for a sizeable roach, found one, burned it down to my fingertips, searched for leftover Sutter Home, of which there wasn’t any, and then nervously checked my phone for any sign that someone out there had thought about me. So much as a request to take Sparkles on a walk would’ve made me feel better, so you can imagine how I felt when I saw:

HANNAH BANANA

I forgot to say thanks for being so nice to me last night.

And I hope it wasn’t weird or anything, ya know, cuz of rach.

Let's shoot for a matinee, yeah? (Broke as a joke yo.)

If Hannah had said all that in person or over the phone and I'd remained silent, letting the seconds pile up, allowing her to distort what my silence meant, it would've been different. But those were texts; for all she knew I was in the shower, or my phone was off or dead. So I just read them over and over, trying to decipher the tone of the first, whether it meant she'd taken my "this was a bad idea" not the way I'd imagined but as "u know, cuz of rach," convinced myself, *Yeah that must be it*, and then decided not to write back till I finished chatting with Rach, who, a moment later, asked:

R: did hannah tell u it was her?

L: She knew? That makes zero sense.

R: know what? we talking about the same thing?

L: What are YOU talking about?

R: hannah's letter to ab . . . she emailed me almost the exact same thing.

L: I beg your pardon? Hannah as in Hannah Banana Hannah?

R: yes, she is pro-sex Prudence. pro-sex prudence is she.

R: but that's between u and me, lar. got it?

L: Does she know who AlgoAbby is?

L: Does Lil know who Pro-Sex Prudence is?

R: don't think so (to both q's).

L: For the AlgoLove of god! You have no idea how bats this is.

R: larry, i think u underestimate me sometimes.

L: We hooked up last night, well, this morning . . . sorta . . .

R: we = u and lily?

L: We = Me and Hannah.

And here, because I still didn't believe she fully grasped the skull-rattling magnitude of this, I confided every unbecoming detail about what'd happened between Hannah and me, from the ticket booth to how . . .

L: Now I know more about her personal life than I should. I feel guilty, Rach.

L: And I'm close to 100 percent sure . . .

L: Correction: I AM 100 percent sure it wouldn't be healthy . . .

R: to what?

L: Date someone who seeks love-life advice from my sister

L: AND ex.

R: did u guys have fun last night? despite the condom mishap i mean.

R: there's no denying hannah's cute and funny and smart . . .

R: shoot, lar bear, i'm sorry but i gotta go. bus leaves in ten. talk later? luv u!

L: OK bye. Love you too.

Unstoppable, angry, monologic wheels in wheels spinning and spinning, I did something stupid and impetuous: I began an ill-advised response to AlgoAbby that, if sent, would break the indefinite "silent thinking time distance" she'd demanded via text six months ago, which I'd heretofore unfailingly honored with steely discipline (not a single drunk dial, not a single midnight "Hey there" or "Whatcha

doin?” text). But fuck honor and fuck discipline and fuck Lily and fuck Brad. What difference did it make now? Sure, there’s plenty I don’t recall—stories Mom tells, Dad tells, friends, Lily, etc. that to me seem either total fabrications or varied versions of what I think happened, and when it’s not one of the memories that return to me unbidden, when it’s not one of the memories that I think define me, then I hardly ever argue. This, though . . . I mean, sure, it wasn’t *technically* Lily’s recount, but still: Where’d this Algo Ego come from? Whose memories were its lame, it’s-always-complicated story based on? Short of belonging to family lore, or half-imagined personal history masquerading as *what really happened*, her story belonged to some substratum, subpar, substandard category of semi-autobiographical bullshit whose falsehoods about *other people*—granted cryptonymous protection or not—are somehow justified by the author’s pseudonymity (not to mention her benevolent intention to *relate* to her readers, *identify* with them, and *empathize* with them). In other words, there was no fucking way I was about to allow her to broadcast if not *her* version then—just as shitty—some phony version of herself’s version of how and why it ended between us. No. No impunity for her. No carte blanche. No free rein. Not after portraying herself as an innocent martyr to my intolerable romantic deficiencies, or XB2’s (who, in any event, deserved representation too).

And so began my feverish keyboard tapping:



Lily—

That's your story, huh? *We dated* for five years? *We* broke up? Emphasis on *we* because that's horseshit and you know it. *You* broke up with *me*. TO BE WITH BRAD. Worse, actually, you cheated on me, you betrayed me. I never convinced you we should take a break. That was *your* idea! How could you forget that? I mean, get real, admit it: you tricked me into thinking that your *close friend* Brad was neither here nor there. The way I remember it—and you know I have 79 percent conversation recall—you said that the feelings you developed for him WHILE WE WERE STILL TOGETHER weren't important but mere symptoms of what we lacked. You never admitted to my face anything about a *fierce, wholehearted love* that made you question whether you'd ever been in love with me. If that was the case, why didn't you tell *me*? Is your hindsight that impaired? Don't you think that if you'd been more specific about questioning your love, about Brad, etc., instead of being so abstract all the time, I would've been more inclined to *talk through these painful truths*? Our *paths diverged*, we had *incompatible spirits* (by which you mean what exactly?). Could you've been more vague? And you blame *me* for not connecting the dots, for not getting you, for making *you* lonely? Did you not think I'd ever read this? Did you not think about how it'd make me feel? What have I ever done to you that would make you want to keep hurting me like this? Why wasn't your betrayal and subsequent psychological manipulation enough? Why, Guru Abby, why?

I don't believe in rereading and revising emails. That's what factual, informational, non-electronic, non-purgative writing (the kind of journalism I came close to getting a degree in) calls for, and so I tried to beat back the urge, rear up and send this without second-guessing what I'd belched out or fearing how it might ruin any chance I clung on to of winning Lily back. But what would be the harm in giving it a quick look (not to finesse its tone but to decide if Lily deserved proof that I still cared)? Then, if I wasn't sure, couldn't I enact Neck Beard's oversimplified existentialist EITHER/OR tattoo? EITHER refrain from drinking and smoking myself to sleep (unrealistic prediction), wake up, sober-minded circumspection restored, read it again for self-edifying purposes, and then, if I didn't see fit hitting *send*, delete it, thereby enacting my preferred Neither/Nor (i.e., neither run the risk of exposing my vulnerability nor of compromising my chances of getting back together with her)/OR drink and smoke myself into a state of stupefaction as usual (realistic prediction), and, assuming I wouldn't get so drunk and high as to think it wise to send this before passing out, wake up hung over and just as angry and spiteful as the night before, and then, full of self-righteous, reckless indignation, send my refutation (worrying neither about its consequences nor about betraying part of my family's Serious Talk credo: "Say whatever you want so long as you can do so with poise and candor").

I scrolled to the top, reread what I'd written, realized I'd said not too much but too little. I steeled myself to get going again, starting the next paragraph with "*Playboy*, November 1976," but I was interrupted; my phone buzzed, and in spite of

all the fury and bewilderment and paranoia brought on by the last 18 hours, my initial reaction to said buzzing proved I'd already made legit strides toward exorcising Lily from my soul, because I didn't—I repeat, *did not*—think or hope it was Lily.

HANNAH BANANA

I'm thinkin rio 2.

Jk. I looked. Nothing appealing. Ideas?

I didn't want to leave her hanging or give her any reason to think I was avoiding her, but I was eager to purge my thoughts and worried that solidifying plans would make me lose focus.

Now where was I? Right:

Playboy, November 1976. I'd gotten it, Lily, when I was like nine, from the paper bin at the recycling center. Then in high school, when you found it among my small stack of dirty magazines, which I hadn't "used" since we'd started hooking up, you opened it to the naked Patti McGuire leaning against a jukebox and calmly asked, "You think she's hot?" I said yes. I saw no reason to lie. And then your shoulders curled inward and a look of deep hurt entered your eyes. Remember this? You said something like, "I know it's crazy, but it still makes me jealous."

I didn't see it like you did. I failed to see the beauty in your jealousy (just as you failed to see the beauty in mine when I was *paranoid* about Brad). And I can admit that I wasn't able to connect the emotion dots back then. (Is it too late to say I see the links between your mom's why-do-you-need-a-training-bra? insults and my drooling over Patti McGuire's hefty tits?) I dropped the magazine in the trash and said, "There, never again," which was shortsighted, because breaking that promise was far too easy to justify: *1) shallow attention paid to two-dimensional Patti McGuire doesn't bar heartfelt attention paid to three-dimensional you; 2) looking at pictures doesn't diminish my love for you; and 3) what you don't know can't hurt you.* Solid—but not so solid as to drive off my misgivings.

When I retrieved the condemned magazine from the trash, rather than flipping straight to the glossy centerfold, I read the "incredible Playboy interview" on "politics, religion, the press, and sex" with the "real" Jimmy Carter. When I got to his infamous confession—"I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times."—I thought about what you'd said, your Christian upbringing, how you'd spent Sunday mornings at Faith Way Church with your mom while I was at home having Serious Talks, and then, unclear guilt weighing heavy on my conscience, tossed the magazine and the rest of my spank-bank collection in the trash, vowing never to two-time you again: *From this day forward, I will direct all my sexual attention, inside my head and out, to Lily and Lily only.* And then what? You went and two-timed *me*, twofold: first, emotionally

cheating on me with Brad, and second, lying to the whole world about what happened.

Not that long ago Rach told me I needed to learn to be alone, so I tried to start taking care of myself, eating vegetables, reading for pleasure, exercising, etc., but it wasn't easy (for instance, I started swimming laps at the Y again, but I always wound up too distracted to swim in a straight line and so kept hitting the lane divider). There were other ways of taking care of myself, though, like, ya know, *taking care of myself*, but I couldn't even do that anymore because whenever I tried you'd pop into my head, and that defeated the purpose of getting you *out* of my head. So I gave that a rest too, and then ended up going so many months without taking care of myself that I started having wet dreams like a pubescent teen. And as if that wasn't pathetic enough, when I remembered the sex dream—always featuring you of course—I'd get so sad I'd weep into my pillow till I willed myself to flip it over onto its dry side, change my boxers, go back to sleep, face the terrifying prospect of suffering those night terrors of you and Brad dancing cheek-to-cheek in our kitchen the way old married couples do in Lifetime movies and Viagra commercials, and then wake up in sweat-soaked sheets, or else, if I couldn't sleep, just lie there staring at the Africa-shaped water stain on my ceiling that reminded me of our post-college around-the-world trip plans.

This is all to say that I ended up justifying jerking off to you before going to bed because it seemed the only way to break the cycle. Which for a while there I did every night, only it wasn't fun and exciting like it once was; I wasn't waiting till my parents went to bed to rifle through my

aforementioned spank-bank collection of Victoria Secret catalogues, the November 1976 *Playboy*, and my single *SkyMall* magazine with that tiny picture of a brunette sporting a one-piece swimsuit on page 57. I wasn't discovering myself or playing with myself or escaping to a sound-minded boy's fantasy land. Even when I was a kid, intimacy was inextricably linked to horniness (case in point: Patti McGuire and I would hold hands and have long talks about how when we were together nobody else in the world mattered). So instead of surfing YouPorn or Youjizz or RedTube till sufficiently rocklike-aroused to squeeze one out, I'd lie on my back in the dark, scrolling through scenes of you and me.

But here's the thing: I never had much editorial control over my memories (you know this; you once said: "Love, a conversation isn't a free-association game"). So I'd be all lotioned up in wet-dream-prevention mode, thinking of that time in the T.J.Maxx dressing room, which smelled just like the drier sheets you used, and next thing I knew my mind was making the synesthetic leap to that cold evening late last winter:

Me, waiting for you to come home, doing laundry; you, jet-black bangs pasted to your forehead, coming in from the rain; me tossing you a warm towel, asking where you'd been and where your umbrella was; you taking the towel, making a beeline for the bathroom, saying "I left it at Starbucks"; me trying to be cool about my next question—"Who'd you go with?"—while trailing you; you taking your clothes off, bending over the tub, fiddling with the hot-water knob, being evasive:

"I'll heat up that soup after I shower."

“Who were you studying with?”

“I didn’t say I was studying.” You in the shower now.

“Who were you hanging out with then?”

“Love, it’s not attractive when you get nosy like this.”

“I’m not being nosy.” I sat down on the toilet and looked at you through the world-map shower curtain’s transparent seas. Your green bellybutton stud glinting smack in the middle of the North Atlantic, a pink nipple in Baffin Bay, right hip hiding behind the Eastern Seaboard, left hip and thigh sailing along the Gulf of Guinea.

“Just making conversation,” I said. “Can I get in with you?”

“You’ll block the hot water.”

“You’re right,” I said, and then got up and flushed the toilet.

A few seconds later: “Larry, what the fuck!!!”

I heated up the soup and put two bowls down on the breakfast-nook table.

“Can I ask you something?” I said.

“Would it even make a difference if I said no?”

“Do you think I don’t, like, give, or share enough?” In bed, I meant, but all you said was:

“How much Tabasco you put in here?” Then your phone vibrated.

“Don’t.”

You picked it up anyway, glanced at the screen, got up and went outside to talk. You came back a few minutes later and matter-of-factly announced: “My dad died.”

This is for sure going to sound bad—real bad, I know—but the first thing that occurred to me was *Thank God Brad didn't call*, which wasn't as insensitive and selfish a thought as it would've been had your dad not abandoned you and your mom when you were nine, had we not been stuck in a romantic rut, had we not needed something to remind us of what really mattered, that we really mattered, that you needed me at a time like this, because even if you were too proud to admit that his death affected you, I knew it did, deeply, and only I—not a friend, *definitely* not Brad—could give you the support you needed.

"His lung collapsed," you said, "while riding his Elliptical. The funeral's on Saturday."

"You wanna go?"

"No but I should."

"We can dip into our travel fund for tickets."

"I think I should go alone."

"Don't say that—I'm going with you."

So that Friday afternoon we flew to Chicago, went to your dad's funeral the following morning, and then, later that night, in your widowed step-mom's basement, you started kissing my neck and licking my ear, which I didn't think was a good idea, given the situation and the house full of relatives and all, because if we could hear the dog whimpering at the top of the stairs, your step-mom crying in her room directly overhead, your half-brothers playing Rainbow Six in the den across the hall, your step-aunt and uncle in the living room guessing at the specifics of your dad's will, then



certainly they could hear our Murphy bed's squeakiness and your telling me to stop being a prude. But I wasn't stupid—here was my opportunity to show you what I'd meant by *sharing* more—so instead of keeping up my protest, I dipped under the covers.

With the springs creaking under us and the dog scratching at the door above us and your self-oblivious moaning between us, I got nervous and self-conscious and stopped for a second to lift my head and remind you to lower it a decibel or two, but you couldn't care less. You shushed me, pressed my head down, and said, "Don't stop, don't fucking stop, don't stop, Love, don't stop."

(Back on track, I rewound this blissful scene to the you-pressing-my-head-down part, beating back all its associated bullshit, and looped it till I mission-accomplished into a stiff old sock. But then, as per usual, the dopaminergic afterglow quickly burned off, leaving me with an oppressive sadness, and not before long all these sad memories—one after the other; memories of sad memories; memories within sad memories—they stormed me, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake them, suppress them, ignore them. So which was worse? Having wet dreams and then night terrors or taking preventive measures into my own right hand and then helplessly wending through a memory-within-memory labyrinth twisted and contorted and flipped upside down by mental lapses and perception relapses into the mind-fucking, soul-corroding, conscious and unconscious universe of our breakup? A lose-lose situation, this sequence of memory-to-

memory mayhem. Madness, you might call it, or what? love? love turned sour? bliss? bliss inverted?)

Early the next morning, post-funeral, you and I at the Chicago airport, waiting to board the plane, you on your iPhone and I people-watching, which unavoidably involved looking at pretty women, and a minute or two later, my eyes following a red-headed bombshell boarding a Dallas-bound plane, you put your phone away and looked up just long enough to catch me. You scoffed, and called me out again for having a “disgusting ogling habit,” reminding me of that time you’d ordered a copy of Irwin Shaw’s collected stories, a so-called gift, and told me to read “The Girls in Their Summer Dresses.” Right, a *gift*, Lily, not a lesson, huh? A story about an inveterate skirt-gazer whose wife tells him to keep his eyes to himself, prompting the husband to defend himself, which gives way to a pretty ordinary marital quarrel that, when it finally comes to a head at a bar, leads the wife to admit she’s worried that one day he’s going to cheat on her or leave her, which in turn leads the husband to admit that, well, sure, it’s possible, one day he may want to be with another woman, or many women, but there’s no point in talking about it now, seeing as neither she nor he can predict the future (obviously not the kind of assurance the wife’s looking for), and then, as the wife walks away—this is how the story ends—the husband turns and thinks, “What a pretty girl, what nice legs.”

No sooner had I put the book down than you asked me what I thought.

“It’s endearing,” I said, “that he looks at his wife the same way he looks at other women. And it’s too bad she doesn’t get that.”

“Endearing? The husband objectifies her and every other woman and even says he won’t be faithful.”

“He says he doesn’t know, because he can’t. At least he’s being honest.”

Remember back in high school when I went to church with you to prove to your mom I wasn’t a heathen, and they sang that spiritual “Dem Dry Bones” (which I used to think was just a dumbed-down anatomy lesson)? You know: “Toe bone connected to the foot bone . . . Shoulder bone connected to the neck bone/neck bone connected to the head bone”—but it just stopped there and went straight to: “Now hear the word of the Lord.” (As they say, once you start believing, you stop thinking.) Well if someone resurrected James Weldon Johnson’s dried-up bones, I’d fill him in: The head bone’s connected to the memory bone/the Lily bone to the bliss bone/the bliss bone to the sad bones (repeat 3x)/now piece dem bones together and whatcha got?

Because I look at my pile of bones and piece them together and what I got is the bottommost sad bone—my bliss bone disconnected from your crotch bone—connected to this sad bone here and that sad bone there, all connected inside my uppermost pain bone.

Now hear *my* words, Lily: You knew what was going to happen with us and you and Brad as well as the husband in Shaw’s story does, didn’t you? I mean, deep down you knew. But knew what exactly? Like did you know

while we were squeaking on that Murphy bed that as soon as we got back from Chicago you'd begin to unfurl your justifications, our so-called divergent trajectories, our growing apart, our long-time-coming transformation—romantic to platonic love—our needing to take a break, and so on and so forth and so what the fuck was wrong with me? and why the fuck didn't I have the emotional and mental and testicular wherewithal to see the connections and correct you when you said that your friendship with Brad was merely a sign of our having slipped away from each other, a symptom of our diminished intimacy, a symbol of what we'd lost? Because it was not a sign, not a symptom, not a symbol; it was a goddamn *signal*, from you to me, that our love bones were now dead and would never rise again.

And what did I know? What do I know? What will I ever get out of this version? You told Pro-Sex Prudence that at one point you neglected to follow your bliss, in an AlgoBlog dated September 2<sup>nd</sup> no less—an anniversary of ours, which I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't remember. After all, I didn't till very recently, just a few days ago in fact, when I took out my Bliss List for the first time in over a year and by chance (fate? kismet? call it what you will . . .) came upon this entry:

“Bliss Moment #44, Pumpkinville Links, hole 11, sand trap on right side of dogleg, me and Lil with a bottle of tequila taken from dad's writing shed, pretending we were on the beach, first time I say I love you, and she says I love you too!!!” Number 44 marks the beginning of a Bliss Era for me.

Before #44 it's just a bunch of silly stuff like sinking a game-winning leaner and getting drunk on peppermint schnapps, “feeling one with the

trees” before barfing on one. After that, it’s just you you you. A few random selections:

#48: you catching me looking at you from across the cafeteria and smiling.

#59: you making fun of Mr. Farfield’s British accent, calling me Love so many times that it becomes my nickname.

#83: you giving me a blowjob at Pumpkinville Links (24 BJ entries total, which isn’t a perv’s belt-notch tally but proof that they meant something to me).

#94: you and me on the squeaky Murphy bed: “Don’t stop, don’t fucking stop, don’t stop, Love, don’t stop.”

And there it ends. Never reached 100. And I’m not sure I ever will. And that’s sad. Not because 94 moments of bliss aren’t enough but because you became my bliss, and I’m beginning to see clearly now—although in the most painful way possible—that depending on another for bliss is nothing but a lost soul’s ill-fated journey toward everlasting emptiness. I’m living proof. All those years I made you my path to happiness and look where it’s gotten me: alone, in a bare-walled room, reading the falsified blog-version of our end, learning that all those years I loved someone who didn’t love me back, and I never saw it. Because . . . I didn’t want to believe it? I knew it’d be too hard to accept it? get over it? *what?* The worst part is I still think it’s on you to set the record straight, as if that mattered or could change anything. But it doesn’t. It wouldn’t. I don’t want or need anything from you. I just

want you to know how your love bone broke away from my love bone and connected to Brad's love bone.

I didn't hit *send*. Instead I paced around my apartment: into the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom, the bathroom, back into the living room, the kitchen, the living room and bedroom and then bathroom again, where I took a hot shower. Normally my landlady, who lived upstairs, would stomp on the ground to remind me we shared a water heater and that she didn't *appreciate it* when I exploited the fact that utilities were included in my rent, but she'd left town a few days earlier and wouldn't be back till after the New Year, so I ran the water heater dry as a bone, toweled off, took my pills, got dressed. Then, back in the kitchen, I opened the fridge. I was neither hungry nor thirsty, and even if I was, all that was in there were a few almost-empty bottles of ketchup, mustard, and mayo. I checked the fridge out of sheer force of habit, one I'd developed as a child, mostly at other people's homes, something akin, perhaps, to the privacy-invader's medicine-cabinet check. Why I did it compulsively at my own apartment though, I'm not sure.

Anyway, I returned to the living room with my laptop and sat on the couch.

Dear Hannah Banana,

You know what, I didn't have a date last night either. I was alone. Then I got embarrassed that you saw me and so left. Stupid, I know. Anyway, that's not what I need to tell you. I need to tell you that I've read your letter to AlgoAbby, and I think that if we're going to hang out you should know I know all this stuff about you that you might not want me to know (yet?). I also want to tell you that AlgoAbby is Lily, which means I'm XB2, which means you now have the AlgoAbby version of things, which is neither true nor as revealing as my version, which I wrote today and planned on sending to Lily (or not because it's too full of too many details I don't want a written record of). But now I don't want to send it to her or trash it. I want you to read it (I'm attaching it below). It's only fair.

Trying to reach a hundred with you,

Larry

Then, without giving it much thought, I forwarded both the letter and prefatory email to Rach.

Subject: Will you please . . .

Body: . . . help a brother out? I sent this to Hannah. Full of instant remorse, self-doubt, etc. So will you read it and tell me if a) it's too much or b) if it's not too much, and/or c) what I should do if she doesn't write back. THANK YOU! P.S. Have fun in D.C. with Code Dude.

## CHAPTER II

I rode my bike to Ms. Humphry's house and then walked Gus to the park, where I played fetch with him. Actually, I just threw the ball and watched him saunter in its general direction before getting sidetracked by the odor of another dog's ass, which he sniffed at, and then lifted his tail and lowered his rear a few inches above the ground. He watched me watching him, holding that sidelong gaze typical of dogs crapping, as if crapping were something to be ashamed of. I paid Gus the respect of breaking our bizarre staring contest and looked around to see if any of the other dog owners scattered around the park saw what he was doing. I noticed an old-timer with ghost-white caterpillar eyebrows and a stooping posture rise from the bench he was sitting on, and as he walked toward me, I made sure not to meet his gaze, as if not having something with which to pick up after Gus was something to be ashamed of. The man approached me and handed me a plastic bag.

"Thanks," I said.

"My wife used to say, 'It's not that old dogs can't learn new tricks; it's that they can't remember them. They're old!'"

"Used to?" I asked.

"When she was alive."



“Sorry,” I said, somewhat annoyed that he’d cornered me like this, giving me no choice but to consider his troubles when I had plenty of my own. He nodded, his sorrowful eyes still trained on me, as if I owed him something. So I added, “When she pass away?”

“Don’t say that,” he said. “Don’t say *pass away*. Gas you pass, keys you lose, breath you expire, and to the store you go. When you die, you die.” His voice was husky, his laugh raspy from a buildup of mucus in his throat. He coughed, spat on the ground; then added, “How old are you?”

“Twenty-three,” I told him.

He cleared his throat again and took out his iPhone. “I tell ya, I really don’t know what to make about this cloud business.”

*Great, I thought, now he wants to talk about the fucking weather.* “Looks like rain,” I said.

“No. This”—he thrust his phone in my face—“*my* cloud. My daughter put all these photos in a cloud, she said. I don’t know how to find them.”

“The iCloud,” I said, and showed him. “Here, right here. What’s your Apple ID?”

“What’s that?”

“Your password.”

“I’m not telling you my password.” He rolled his eyes and took his phone back and while entering his password—he mistyped it several times—he muttered something about getting a fine once for not picking up after his dog. “Here we are,”

he said, and used his thick, nicotine-stained finger to swipe through photo after photo of his dog, saying “Just a minute” and “I know there’re here somewhere.” I offered to show him how to return to the thumbnail display, but he just ignored me and went on swiping, searching for pictures to show me, all the while telling me about his dead wife, whom he’d met when he was in his thirties, she was around my age. That’s all I remember—my mind wandered after that. He’d given me a plastic shopping bag; he must’ve thought, ipso facto, that I owed him my ear, it was his right to use me as his personal nostalgia receptacle, or we were friends. But that was him, not me; I didn’t feel that way; I had no interest in what he was saying, whatever he was saying. So I locked my sight on his rheumy eyes and nodded intermittently so as not to offend him as he droned on and on, and not before long I found myself thinking about how nice last night had been with Hannah, to spend an evening with someone as if it were the 90s again, to be present with just the one other person in the room, to talk to that one other person, and to sit quietly, watching TV, with just that one other person. Sans cell phones. It was beautiful, and rare back then.

Hannah’s phone had beeped once, I remembered, followed by a *bzz bzz*—a text, I imagined—and she hadn’t written back, let alone checked to see who it was. Later her phone played Afro Man’s “Because I Got High”—her ring tone; a call, presumably—and, without looking to see who *it* was, she silenced it. Then, not long after that, she asked me what the name of that movie was (“Y’know, the one with Seth Myers and that skinny dude from *That 70’s Show*?”) and I said she must’ve been thinking of something else; Topher Grace and Seth Myers were never in a movie

together. And even then she didn't reach for her phone to look it up on Google or IMDB, rather when I said it might've been *Punk'd* ("Did Ashton Kutcher ever punk Seth Myers?"), and she swore she knew what she was talking about ("Yeah, mos def, Gopher Whatever and Seth Myers were in that movie version of the MacGyver spoof he did on SNL"), and I couldn't help disagreeing (MacGruber, you mean, but that's not Seth Myers, it's Will Forte, the guy in *Nebraska*)—even *then* she didn't use her phone to try to prove me wrong. Instead, she giggled and pointed at the TV, not an SNL skit but a commercial featuring a chimp eating a banana with a fork and knife. That too was beautiful and rare. Not the anthropomorphically sophisticated chimp, which was both ugly and commonplace, but I mean the way Hannah swung from semi-confused/-combative/-concerned to carefree—*that* was beautiful. And the way she didn't seem to mind reaching an argumentative impasse before one of us either convinced the other who was wrong and who was right or looked it up—*that*, among those I knew best, myself included, was rare indeed.

Rach would've argued till she got annoyed with me; then she would've looked it up, and, if right, rubbed it in my face, or, if wrong, said something like, "I was just checking my email." Lily wouldn't have argued at all—she'd sooner seek Internet confirmation or correction than so much as consider running the risk of exposing a memory lapse or lack of knowledge (yes: even about something as trivial as what C-list actor co-starred with what other C-list actor in some C-list movie or other).

"You're not listening to me," the old man said.

“Yes I am.”

“No you’re not. I just asked you a question. Have you ever lost someone you loved?”

“I have,” I said. “A girlfriend.” Had he not caught me ignoring him while he was trying to show me pictures of his dead wife, I wouldn’t have felt pressured to respond as quickly as I did. I would’ve said no. Lucky for me, he was no different from anyone else; he’d asked me a question but had no interest whatsoever in my response. All he wanted was to keep talking. He said, “That’s awful, you’re so young,” and then went on about a friend of his wife’s whose husband had died a year after they got married. I wonder what made him think I wasn’t far more interested in the world inside my head than his wife’s friend’s husband.

Back to my own train of thought.

Mom and Dad—did they count? Did they rely on their phones the way everyone else did? They both had smart phones, and loved them, that’s for sure. Mom, a reliable member of the Anti-Mac Camp, carried a Blackberry, to which she was most certainly addicted, with which she recorded some fifteen voice memos daily, and on which she both saved her every appointment and blamed her every procrastinatory problem; and Dad, a loyal adherent to the Mac Camp, had become so addicted to his iPhone 4—a hand-me-down from Rach—that if he took it to his writing shed in the morning, he’d squander the entire day texting Rach and me links to *New York Times* and *L.A. Times* articles. Now, to be clear—and fair—I should say that you’d never hear Dad say he *squandered* his day sending his kids texts (and to

be perfectly clear, and maximally fair, I'm not saying he'd never use that word, because he did, quite often in fact, but for something like money, which could be *squandered*—never *wasted*—on name-brand foods and clothes, or time: *squandered* watching TV, *spent* looking things up for his children's edification). Dad always said that having kids was the best thing he'd ever done, best thing about his life, best reason to look forward to tomorrow, and in recent years, sending links had become his fallback love language. When Rach got sick of talking about how she worried she'd never procure a lifelong mate and/or have children, Dad sent her Op-Eds about how "thirty is the new twenty," and just a few hours earlier he'd emailed me an article called "Stability or Stupidity?", which claimed that, according to a longitudinal study of 233 men over 57 years, there was a correlation between the tendency to "have deep thoughts" and "a serious mood disorder, such as bipolarity or cyclothemia" (this article was meant to console me, I guess: *I might be bipolar, but at least I have "deep thoughts"*).

Despite all this, and despite the fact Mom and Dad were fierce arguers and loved carrying around their "portable computer devices" with 3G and 4G and Wifi capabilities that, thanks to Google Maps, prevented them from getting lost, and, thanks to Fandango, allowed them to look up what movies were playing without having to track down a paper, Mom and Dad wouldn't have even thought to look something up in the middle of an argument. Why? Simple: they'd both grown up when a cloud was a cloud. Whence the rain dropped and the thunderclap boomed and the lighting bolt struck. Mother Nature's parasol, the Sun God's veil, Andre the

Giant, or Homer Simpson, Woody Woodpecker, a Chinook salmon, a diamond-studded dagger, a ranch-covered cauliflower, or whatever the supine daydreamer wanted to see in the poor man's Rorschach test. Mom and Dad didn't count because they grew up when a cloud was a cloud in the sky, when everyone stored information in and retrieved (on sunny days) information from their heads, or else their notebooks, journals, diaries. They grew up when what they outsourced was manual labor to Indonesia and fuel-efficient cars from Japan, not memories to and from a cloud. Mom and Dad didn't count because they grew up when *a* cloud was just *a* cloud—*the* Cloud didn't yet exist.

I, on the other hand, definitely wouldn't have looked it up. For two reasons: one, I thoroughly enjoy a verbal sparring match, cool or heated, and two, I pride myself on my memory. My episodic memory is far superior to my semantic memory, and although I can't be sure whether the former is better because it's more meaningful to me than the latter or the former is more meaningful to me because it's better than the latter, I know that I value both. Not to mention that I find it infinitely more fun to see how we reconstruct what we think are intact memories than to disregard them lest we learn they're not intact at all.

"She took her here."

"She who?" I asked.

He pointed to a chocolate lab so doddery she made nine-year-old Gus look like a spry little pup.

“Now”—he paused and stared at the ground; I worried he was about to cry—  
“she’s eating shit.”

“What’s that?”

He lumbered past me, bent over to grab his lab, whose chops bore down into the grass right where Gus had taken a crap. He then fish-hooked the chewed-up stool from its mouth and flung it on the ground. Shoving his dog’s snout into the ground, he reproached her: “Don’t *do* that! Bad dog! *Bad!*”

Coprophagy—a word I’d picked up during my time at Come & Pet It—that’s what that was called. Yep. I learned all kinds of neat stuff at the pet store. Oh, you betcha. I also know that nursing mothers often lick their pups’ anuses to activate their defecation reflexes and then eat their feces to keep the nest clean and ward off predators attracted to the scent. Think my knowledge of canine’s shit-eating disorders ends there? Fuck no. I *also* know that while it may be across the board repulsive to humans, it’s actually not unhealthy or abnormal for dogs to eat herbivores’ feces, or for puppies to eat their own and others’ feces. What I don’t know is why some puppies outgrow the habit while others don’t, but that’s not *my* fault; nobody knows, just like nobody knows why humans yawn, or why humans, too, eat shit—others’ as well as their own—till the day they die. There are operating theories, though (I’m talking about dogs’ literal dung consumption again; don’t get me started on my operating theories concerning humans’ figurative shit-eating affliction—not now, at least), the most widely accepted one being that malnourished dogs do it in an attempt to fill a nutrient void.

As I mentioned earlier, I stopped working at Come & Pet It around the same time Lily broke up with me. Now, if I gave the impression that I quit to avoid being around her or something like that, I'm sorry—that's not what happened. Frankly, I couldn't hack it at the pet store. I took good care of the animals (not to mention the time I accidentally sucked up a Siberian hamster in a Shop Vac . . . don't fret, he survived) but the customers—not so much. "This is a pet store, not an animal rescue sanctuary." If I had a nickel for every time Mr. Don the Manager said that, I'd have *at minimum* enough loose change in my pocket for an Abba-Zaba bar. Plus, I was the first to admit it: I fuckin' sucked at up-selling high-priced kibble and cross-selling canine multivitamins. I dreaded talking to over-concerned, health-conscious, Portland yuppies about their pets. How was the beef in Iams raised? Cow, you mean—beef is not an animal. What do I do if my clownfish doesn't get along with the sea anemone in its tank? Tell Nemo, tough luck, life's a bitch. Why won't my bird talk? Because you bought the cheapest one, a stupid parakeet, what did you expect? These comments often got back to Don, but he was—as he put it—a Bear, and I once overheard him tell Lily she was doing a disservice to the gay community keeping me on lockdown the way she did. Nonetheless, he eventually fired me, and I didn't fight it; I'd seen it coming. And by that point, despite the lip I gave to the aforementioned insufferable customers, I'd treated the decent customers well. I knew I'd be able to eke out a living cat- and dog-sitting till I found something else. Which I did. And look at me now, Hairy Man Don. All self-employed and shit, with carte motherfucking blanche to sell whatever the fuck I want, *whenever*, to *whomever*.



*Maybe, I thought, I should ask this old widower what he's been feeding his dog.*

But he didn't give me the chance.

"So was it a car accident?" he said, knees still in the grass.

"Was what a car accident?"

"What happened to your girlfriend."

"Oh, no. She left me for another guy."

"She broke up with you?"

"Yeah."

"She's alive then?"

"Yep."

"Help me up," he said.

I bent over and offered him my hand. He was stocky, barrel-chested, all muscle where fat might've been on another man his age, whereas I was tall, lanky, all skin and bone where a whole lot of muscle would've done me some good, I'm sure. Had I been stronger I wouldn't have made him strain himself to rise to his feet. He cringed. His face reddened. He farted.

"Gas you pass," I said.

He at once laughed and leered suspiciously at me, as if he thought I was making fun of him. Then, after telling his dog it was time to leave, he said, "Not many people want to listen to an old man, so thank you. And forget your girlfriend. You're a good kid. Even if you're not, there's always the Internet. I've had a bit of luck myself with Match.com. It's not as exciting as it used to be, meeting women. It's a

helluva lot easier though. That's worth something." He shook my hand, apologized, and added: "Uh, better make sure to wash up before you eat anything."

Once he was gone, I took out my phone and reread the last few texts from Hannah—

I'm thinkin rio 2.

Jk. I looked.

Nothing appealing. Ideas?

—and thought that even though I'd gotten in touch with her after that, I should probably *text* her back. It wasn't like Hannah was the kind of woman who adhered to inane, *Cosmo*-esque, dating commandments (e.g., If the ball resteth in his court, thou shan't succumbeth to the temptation to leaveth thy side of the net), and even if she was, the ball I'd lobbed over to her side—the email that for sure was too weighty to return post haste—belonged to a much more serious match than the light-hearted movie-plans rally. Surely there was no reason to overthink this.

"Where I'm house/dog-sitting tonight—she's got pretty much every channel," I wrote. Some ten seconds later, Hannah wrote back.

HANNAH BANANA

ME

I thought you just had to walk him . . .

Yeah but she won't be back for a few days.

Ah werd?

Ok.

Does she have flour, baking soda, and baking powder?

At dog park.

I'll check when I get there.

Whatcha wanna make?

Patience, me lad. Patience.

What's she like?

Granola cruncher?

Who?

The proprietor.

She feeds her dog locally made kibble.

That's what I thought.

Enough said.

I'll stop at the store.

Address?

3244 Haverferth.

You sure?

I can stop on my way back.

Not a prob, Bob.

You haven't by chance read my email, have you?

Nope.

But not by chance.

Intentionally.

I observe the tech sabbath.

Sat & Sun: no email.

I will though . . . if I should.

Should I?

If it's not sacrilege.

I can take a little hell fire.

But like before I come over?

Probably.

Uh oh.

Should I put on boots?

Why?

To shake in them?

It's just a link.

To "Nebraskan Girls Gone Wild."

Omaha Steak strap-ons?

Sorry to burst your bubble, bub.

Been seen that shit.

"Cattle Gone Wild"?

Udders in wet white Ts.

A Netflix Original.

Critically Acclaimed Independent Cerebral Animal Rights Titty-Tantrum Docs.

Totes my jam, brah.

I wrote my dissertation on that gone-rey.

?

Genre.

Joke.

Would've been better out loud.

No. It's me.

The email.

Not sure what you're gonna think.

Worry not, grasshopper.

I'll read it then head over.

Coolio?

Gangster's Paradise.

I jogged back to Ms. Humphry's, put Gus inside, grabbed my bike, and took off  
for the store.

### CHAPTER III

When I returned, I saw Hannah had beaten me there. She had on the same outfit as last night. Did she go home and shower like she said she was going to? I wondered. Or did she stay at Doug's house all day?

Sitting on the front steps, smoking a spliff, she said, "Oh thank Yahweh. I wasn't sure this was the right place."

"How long you been waiting?" I set the grocery bags down and hauled my bike up to the porch.

"Lemme see"—she looked at her spliff, now halfway gone—"four minutes twenty seconds, give or take." Hannah hopped down the steps on one foot, passed me the spliff, grabbed the groceries and took them up to the front door. "I *really* gotta pee, though," she said, hopping up and down beside the door.

I reached into my pockets. "Fuck," I said. "I think I left my keys in there."

"Is there a hidden one?"

"Could be."

We checked the usual places: under the doormat, the mailbox, the terra cotta pots; then those *somewhat* better concealed places key-hiders wouldn't feel so sure about if they realized burglars and non-burglars with half a brain alike—we've all seen crime shows and movies—could easily ferret out: atop the doorframe and window sill, under the first couple inches of potted-plant soil, behind the NO

SOLICITORS and (usually for-show) THIS HOME PROTECTED BY HUNGRY HAWK SECURITY SYSTEM plaques. We even unscrewed the porch light from the wall. All in vain.

As we walked along the side of the house to the back yard, Hannah said, "Sorry, dude. You go ahead. I gotta pop a squat. No choice."

"You do you," I told her, and headed to the back yard.

"My bladder's gotta be the size of a marble," she said. "I can't hold it. Ever. *Annnnywayyyy*, why don't ya just call her and see? I bet a neighbor's got one."

"Nah," I said, "rather not."

Ms. Humphry's information was saved in the computer at Come & Pet It. I could've called and gotten an old co-worker to get it for me, but telling Ms. Humphry about this situation would've been as good as telling her she'd better start scouting out a less scatterbrained dog-sitter. And remember, even though I didn't plan on making a career out of dog-sitting, at that time my livelihood depended on it (*livelihood*, if I could even call it that). Since splitting rent with Lily, working at Come & Pet It for \$9.50 an hour, and receiving Federal Student Aid and Cascadia College student loan checks, I'd been living a hand-to-mouth existence in Portland. After rent, health insurance (which I paid for only because it covered most of what my Uncle Sam drug dealer and Wellbutrin prescriptions cost me), and all the Popeyes fried chicken and Taco Bell Chalupas and Wendy's Junior Bacon and Cheese burgers and beer and booze that were *not* covered by my Electronic Benefits Card, I had, on average, according to my fastidiously organized financial records, three and a half pennies more than jack shit; and calling home for a bail out wasn't an option. My

mom was an adjunct instructor at Bandbridge Community College, teaching Technical Writing and English Composition classes that, with good reason, seeing as she held a PhD in English and had co-written two published books, she felt were beneath her. My dad was the author of some three dozen unpublished short stories (read only by the editors of the magazines and literary quarterlies who rejected him), a free-lance journalist, and a semi-consistent contributor of Op-Eds to the *Pumpkinville Gazette*. Rach lived on a school teacher's salary, which was, numerically, greater than Mom and Dad's combined annual income, but, owing to the prohibitively high cost of living in New York City, worth half a peanut more than a box of stale Cracker Jacks (and even though I knew she, who'd always taken satisfaction in every form of independence other than monetary, had recently started dating the filthy rich founder of AlgoLove.com and ProgramOurFuture.org, I didn't know if she'd made him her sugar daddy yet or what). So, yes, we Brians weren't well-heeled, but we'd always been more or less realistic and responsible—stingy, to outsiders—with what we had, which meant at least one of us always had a rainy-day fund stashed somewhere, and we'd always been a we're-in-this-together, *mi-casa-es-su-casa* kind of family, but even so, asking Mom or Dad or Rach for a loan was out of the question. Why? Because, to be frank, I was too proud—not to mention prone to feeling debt-related guilt—to even so much as intimate to them I was in a bind. Self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and self-actualization—these were for all practical purposes the pillars on which the Brian family's value system rested. At the same time though, nothing could please each of us more than discovering an



opportunity to run to each other's rescue in a time of need, be it economical, emotional, educational—you name it—because in many ways we were just like any other American family: loyal, generous, protective, self-sacrificing, and, above all else, insecure as shit. We knew no better way to assure ourselves that our lives were in order than by assisting someone whose life was in a shambles. And what this meant was that whenever one Brian sought help from another Brian, they must first admit failure. As such, I could not—*would not*—put myself in that self-degrading and self-defeating position. In other words, I neither could nor would call Ms. Humphry.

“All right, *sooooo*,” Hannah said, “wanna say fuck it and go to your place or something, and then worry about it tomorrow?”

“*My* keys are in there, remember?” My irritation—not with Hannah but myself and the situation—seeped through. I tried to correct it: “What would MacGruber do? There's peat moss on the—”

“Hold on a sec”—all business all of a sudden, she cut me off—“do *you* have a spare hidden to *your* place?”

“Nope.”

“But your landlady does, yeah? Problem solved. I should be a detective, or a private eye. I'd crush it.”

“She's out of town.”

In this situation, Lily—the kind of tightly-wound, unforgiving perfectionist who believed not only that she'd never make such a mistake but that nobody else (especially I) could be trusted not to make such a mistake, and, despite her surplus

of self-confidence and unwavering conviction that I couldn't handle something so simple as to make sure not to lock the keys in the house—in this situation, she would've acted shocked and appalled, crossed her arms, and delivered a condescending sermon on mindfulness before coming up with a solution. Hannah, who was laughing right now, was to all intents and purposes Lily's counterpoint, typifying tolerance and understanding. I was glad she was able to ignore my irritation. I was also too embarrassed and worried about how we'd get inside, though, to laugh with her.

“You know I'm not laughing *at* you, right?” she said. “The coincidence is just *goofy*, y'know?”

“I know, I know. I'm just thinking of a plan, that's all.”

She took out a pouch of rolling tobacco and twisted two cigarettes. She put one in her mouth, lit it, placed it between my lips, and then the other between hers. “I read this article recently,” she said, “in the *New York Times* or, who'm I kidding? It was probably Yahoo News or some other dumb site with a dumb sans-serif font. Anyway, this sociologist lady puts a group of dudes in one room, right? and group of women in another room, and then asks the women what scares them most about dudes. Then she asks the dudes what scares them most about women. And like *all* the women said the same thing: what scares them the most is that they laugh at a man and make him flip and murder them. And pretty much *all* the men say they're scared of women laughing at them. Isn't that nuts?”

“Hannah, you can laugh at me.”

"I don't think you're gonna kill me, LZB. Just think about it though. We always hear about these really normal dudes or whatever who won't hurt a fly, right? and then one day they just *snap* and strangle a bitch. Then when they get into that interrogation room and the bad cop goes rough and tumble and the little fuckwad pisses himself and crumbles into a pile of shit, it comes out: the last he remember is her laughing at him. But—"

"I'm pretty sure I'd sooner swat a fly than strangle a bitch for laughing at me."  
"Someone's got an interrupting problem. What's that about? Rach too. That run in the family or something?"

"Sorry," I said. "You're right. We all do it. It's bad."

"No need to deodorize, bub. Don't sweat it. Just sayin'. Anyway, this was going somewhere . . . right! Get this. On AlgoLove, as the number one character trait women seek in a man, it's almost always 'Has a good sense of humor,' so when I read that article I was like, must be subconscious. They don't want a man that'll make them laugh. They want a man—"

"That won't go OJ Simpson on their ass if they do."

"You did it again."

"My bad."

"It's all good. Anyway, 'that shit cray, ain't it, Jay'?"

"What she order? A fish fillet?"

"LZB, you like totally get me, man."

"*Everyone should* have a healthy fear of being murdered, I'd say?"

“Exactly. I have a perfectly healthy fear of being murdered.”

“Me too. Know what? I also have a perfectly healthy fear: that if I don’t give this dog his medication, Ms. Humphry’s gonna fire me.”

“Oh no! Poochie’s sick? That changes everything. We *gotta* get in there.”

Hannah bounded up the steps to the back porch. At the top, she said, “Well, well, well. What. Do. We. Have. Here. Now we *really* got in there, cuz we *really* gotta get in here. You didn’t say anything about a hot tub. Poochie first, tub second, of course. LZB, check the windows.”

And so we investigated the back windows; then all the first-storey windows around the house. All locked.

On the back porch again, we deliberated.

“I guess one of us should get on the roof,” Hannah said.

“I’ll do it.”

“You’ll break the gutter. Think you can hoist me up there?”

“Maybe. Hop on the tub.”

And so we gave that a go; pulled it off without a hitch.

Kneeling beside the window to Ms. Humphry’s room, Hannah said, “Name the world’s dopest arc.”

“What?”

“Triomphe, *biotch!*” She slipped in, came down, and let me in.

Lying on the kitchen floor, letting Gus lick her face, she said, “So what’s he got? He seems pretty hale and hearty to me. Hella hale, hella hearty. Hope it’s not contagious.”

“I’m not exactly sure,” I said. “In the note she just said to give him two of these a day.” I handed her the unmarked Ball jar in which Ms. Humphry kept the mysterious gel capsules.

“They look like my dad’s indigestion pills.” Hannah faced Gus. “Does Mr. Poochie suffer from poochie heartburn? Ah, baby doll, momma’s gonna make it all better. I keep my medicine in a Ball jar too.” She held the jar above her face and squinted. Then she looked at me. “You look the number up?”

“What number?”

“On the pill.”

“Didn’t even think of it.”

“Yeah, well—”

Trying to force his tongue inside her mouth, Gus prevented Hannah from saying whatever she was about to say, and since the jealousy I felt at seeing Gus’s affections so warmly received by Hannah reminded me of one of the several jokes my dad liked to repeat, I didn’t ask. I said, “So I was at the dog park today.”

“Yeah, I know, you told me.”

“And I saw this pit bull licking himself, red-rocket out and everything. So I told my buddy, ‘Wish I could do that.’ And he—”

“What buddy? You didn’t mention a buddy.”

“Now you’re interrupting me.”

Hannah mimed zipping her lips shut.

“So I said, ‘I wish I could do that,’ and my buddy looked at the dog, then back at me, and said, ‘He looks kinda mean—you should probably pet him first.’”

“Really?”

“It was a joke.”

“Ahhhh. Sorry, bub. You need to work on the set up. You threw me off, you were really at the park.”

“All right. Critique noted.”

From her backpack, Hannah removed a pint-sized Ball jar about three-quarters full of a pale, yellow, gelatinous liquid speckled with brownish-green particles. “Budder, baby. Get it? Like Bud and butter. Bud butter. Budder.”

“Butt butter?”

“Not butt. Not a T, a D—as in, ‘Doofus, it’s THC butter.’ ”

“Bud of course it is.”

I skirted to the front porch, came back with the groceries. Hannah got started on the cookies and I went out back to see if the hot tub was on, which it was, but set to 93 degrees (the jacuzzi equivalent of a non-alcoholic beer—pointless). I cranked it up to 102 and went back inside.

“So?” Hannah said. “Rub-a-dub-dub in da tub, or what?”

“In a bit. It’s gotta reach at a hund . . . it’s just gotta heat up first.”

“The ol’ preheat, huh? Like oven like tub.”

“Need a sous-chef? Or sous-baker? Can’t say I’ve ever made cookies, but I used to mix the dough for my mom. I could be your sous-mixer boy is what I’m saying.”

“How about my sous-mixologist? This Humphry bizznatch ain’t a teetotaler, is she?”

Nope: in the cupboard above the sink I found a few bottles of red wine, half a bottle of cheap white rum, a third of a bottle of peach liqueur, and, in the fridge, to mix with, a small but curvaceous bottle of pomegranate juice and an unopened carton of unpasteurized, “Most Pulp,” orange juice. Not exactly a mixological smorgasbord, but enough to work with. I mixed two parts white rum, one part peach liqueur, added a dash of pomegranate juice, and stirred it over a couple of rocks.

“Here”—I handed her the concoction—“tell me whatcha think.”

Hannah sipped. “Not bad.”

We both finished our cocktails before Hannah put a batch of cookies in the oven. She handed me a spoonful of raw dough. I ate in one bite. She took the spoon, loaded it up again, and fed it to me. I would’ve thought she was being flirtatious had she not tilted it forward and said robotically “Nerd alert, nerd alter, here comes the Segway” as she shoved it into my mouth. I then whipped up a second round of drinks, this time paying less attention to the measurements, and went a bit overboard on the white rum.

She raised her drink. “Shall we imbibe our libations in the spring, sire?”

“We shall.”

Outside, Hannah turned the porch light off and undressed. I followed suit, tossing my clothes onto the deck's railing. Naked, we got in. The night sky's glaucous clouds hung low overhead. The cold air stung my bare neck and face. Shoulders down the water—now at a reasonable hundred degrees—warmed me up.

Hannah licked her finger. "She *is* a granola cruncher. It's salt. Not chlorine."

"Jets or no jets?" I asked.

"Your call."

"Too hard to talk over the jets. Let's wait till we have nothing to say."

"A man with a plan, and a prediction. Sad prediction, but realistic—I can dig it."

Lacking the courage to ask whether she'd read the email, I said, "I don't really imagine being rich, but if I *were* rich someday, I'd for sure have a hot tub, and never wear the same pair of socks twice."

"You're like some modern day Tevye." Hannah put the sides of her hands together and began scooping up water, ferrying it over her head, dousing her hair.

Again, I might've thought she was trying to be seductive had she not said, "What would you do with all those used socks? Mission accomplish in them and then toss 'em?"

Ignoring her allusion to the letter, I said, "I dunno. Donate 'em?"

"To *who*?"

"Kids in Africa. The poor. A homeless shelter."

"That's *rude*. African kids don't want your stiff old socks."



"Can't say I've thought this through."

"Why not just invent disposable socks? Maybe that'll make you rich."

"Like the ones at shoe stores?"

"Sure."

"Too thin. They have to be real socks."

"*Disposable.*" Hannah scoffed, took a sip of her drink. "Dumb. What's *not* disposable?"

"What would you do?"

"If I were a rich? I like the hot tub idea. I watched this thing on Animal Planet about Japanese macaques. They spend all winter in a hot spring. That's pretty dope. I'd be down with that."

"How about your dream job?"

"These questions—they're like from an AlgoLove questionnaire or some shit."

"Really?"

"Forget it. My dream job. Huh. When I grow up, I wanna be . . . left alone."

Hannah dipped her face in the water and blew bubbles. When she emerged, she wiped her eyes off and said, "Isn't it weird we still say that—*when we grow up*? What's that say about us? Are *we* not grown-ups yet?"

I'd said *rich*, not grown-up. But she probably already took me for an obsessive record-keeper, what with the email and its Bliss List entries and all. So I went with it: "When I was in Kindergarten, the fifth graders were grown-ups. But even now, I don't feel like a grown up." That first part was true; that last part though,

not really. On the subject of feeling like an adult, as with most other subjects, I was of two minds. At times I felt like an adult, at other times like an aimless teenager, swaying this way and that, filled with confidence one moment, depleted of all certainty the next, just like a lush, overflowing with love and life and hope at night, and then, come morning, sullen and brain-dead and incredulous, thinking, *Who was that last night? Why'm I not like that all the time?* Sometimes I felt neither an adult nor a teenager but a shell-shocked child, desperate and needy, thumb waterlogged from overexposure to saliva, whiningly pleading, as if it were a matter of life and death, for someone to stroke my back and whisper in my ear, *There, there, everything's going to be all right.*

“Me neither,” Hannah said. “And I’m almost thirty. At least you’ve got time.”

That was annoying, and patronizing: her pointing out our age difference. More annoying still, she showed no self-awareness, said nothing to narrow the gap.

“And to be honest,” she went on, “I don’t even *want* to be an adult. Adults are fuckin' lame, dude. So serious all the time, like people give a fuck. And it’s worn off on me, I can feel it. I used to get stoked, man, for such simple things.” She held up a fist and then, as she listed the things that used to excite her, thrust a finger in the air so emphatically that she flung salt water on my face. “Recess. Monopoly. Monkey in the Middle. Microwaveable burritos from Costco—but never the red-hot beef ones. Oh, and—”

I cut her off. “No way, those are the best ones!”

“Grody, LZB. Them shits *nasty*. You nasty. Anyway, Reb Incurrigible Interrupter, I was saying . . . Yeah, and now pretty much all I get stoked about is getting ripped after work. Which is fuckin' stupid, because I get ripped before and during work.” Then—probably because she correctly read my inverted lips as fear of interrupting *again*—she punctuated her miniature rant with the slightly disjointed thought: “Being responsible for your own survival fucking sucks, man.”

“Amen to that, soul sista.”

“Mazel tov, homie.” She clinked her glass against mine. Then, out of left field, she spit it out: “So that email. I read it.”

There it was at last. But, as I said before, more often than not I was at odds with myself, split in two, stuck at the crossroads of competing urges.

On the one hand, I was pleased she'd brought it up. After all, from the moment I'd sent that email to that moment in the hot tub, I'd been itching to know what she thought about it, by which I mean I'd been itching to know what it made her think of me, although, I admit, I wish that weren't the case. Believe me: I fucking hate the fact that as a rule everything I did and said was dictated by my prediction of the impression it made on others. It's no way to live, no way to be, I know, I know. Better just to do what I do and say what I say because it's what *I* want rather than what I *think* someone else wants, and then just fucking live with it. *I did that, I said that, I am that—fine by me if it's not fine by you.*

On the other hand, though, I thought maybe Hannah and I had better ignore it altogether, or else postpone talking about it and at least *try* to go through the

preliminary motions of getting to know each other better before rushing headlong into such serious territory. *What's worse: too little, too late? Or: too much, too soon?* Wasn't the letter and prefatory email containing—so I thought at the time—both the wise, nuanced “if we're going to hang out” and the ill-advised, imbecilic—though I didn't realize it at the time—sign-off “Trying to reach a hundred with you” already a bit much?

“You did?” I said. “Really, you read it?”

“You said I should, didn't you? And I said I was gonna, didn't I?”

“You're right,” I said, “I *did*, you *did*. Soooo . . . ?”

“So what?”

“Comments? Questions? Concerns?”

“Lily is AlgoAbby,” Hannah stated flatly.

“That's a fact,” I said and refrained from adding *not a comment*.

“Yeah,” she said, “I mean, who woulda thought, right?”

“When'd you say the press conference was?” I asked.

“*Press* conference,” she said, “what?”

“Your questions are so—what's the word?—incisive.”

“All right, all right,” she said. “Funny man in the hot tub. *Funny, funny man.*”

I wasn't trying to be funny. At least not in the spirit of joking around. I was nervous and worried and as a result on guard, and when I got that way, I tended to try to conceal my feelings behind flippant, smart-alecky jabs.

“OK, so it was for sure a ballsy move,” Hannah said. “*Quite* ballsy. Sending that to me. Honorable, too, I’d say. Embarrassing as shit”—she cocked her head left and shrugged—“but honorable. I’ll give you that.”

“I *am* embarrassed,” I said. “I thought—”

“Not for *you*.” She interrupted me as if she were an unapologetically caustic but considerate teacher, at once scolding me for giving a wrong answer and saving me from stumbling through an explanation of said wrong answer. “For *me!*” she added, “embarrassing for *me*.” Again, she dunked her head in the water and blew bubbles; then shot up and, water trickling down her face, said, “But just so you know I have a cream that should work.”

She’d blurted out those words so fast that between the moment they met my ear and the moment I comprehended their meaning, I impatiently said, “*What?*” thereby unwittingly making her feel more awkward than I imagined she already did.

“My OBGYN,” she said, “gave me something for the, *ehem*, marshmallow effect. Industrial, scrip strength.”

“Is that what you’re embarrassed about?” I asked. “Because, Hannah, I don’t care. Really. Like *at all*.”

To that she replied: “Bull. Shit.”

Sometimes Hannah rolled her eyes just like anyone else, but other times—like right then, after thinking she’d called my bluff—she stuck the tip of her tongue out and twirled it in unison with her rolling eyes. I figured these mannerisms expressed slightly different attitudes, but I’d yet to decipher any kind of pattern, so I

didn't know what to make of that. I stared quizzically at her. And I was pretty sure it was that look on my face that she was reacting to when, after a long pause, she added:

"Of course it matters, man. how could it not? Look." She contorted her body so as to reach over the rim of the hot tub where the control panel was and turn on the underwater light. "See," she said, "right there. Pink and brown magic mushroom."

"Hannah," I said.

"Larry," she replied.

"Seriously, Hannah, believe me. I *don't* care. I actually thought it was funny, and kinda brave."

"Brave?" she said incredulously. "What? My Prudence letter? My ass. It was supposed to be anonymous."

It would've been nice to back up what I'd just said so as to give her a valid reason to feel, if not proud, at least not-embarrassed, and therefore less self-conscious, about her confessions to AlgoAbby. But she was right: neither I nor anyone else (not counting Rach, and possibly Doug) was supposed to know she was Pro-Sex Prudence, and so, caught off guard, all I could come up with was:

"But still though, y'know?"

"Can't say I do," she said.

"What I sent you—there was nothing brave about that." As the words leapt off my tongue, something at least halfway smart and reassuring occurred to me: "At least *your* letter wasn't *burdeny* like mine was."

“What d'ya mean?” she said.

“I don’t think I should’ve dumped all that on you.”

Then, all at once (and at long last) she sloughed off the sarcastic skin enveloping her every word and screening her vulnerable side, which was so evident in the anonymous letter in question, and with true sincerity said:

“At least you were straightforward. I don’t really know what to make of the whole scale-balancing idea, trading secrets for secrets and all that . . . I mean, you coulda just told me you happened to read it and figured out it was me—that would’ve been more than enough, *much* more than most would’ve done. But burdeny? Nah, not at all, man. I didn’t feel burdened by it. It’s not like you were asking me for help or anything like that. Honestly, I felt bad for you.”

“So not burdeny but pathetic,” I said. “You pitied me. Great.”

“C’mon, Larry, I didn’t say that. Let’s see, what am I trying to say here?” She turned her gaze skyward and rubbed her bottom lip with the tip of her middle finger while searching for a more precise explanation. “Y’know, it’s like Lily always seemed so . . . so *vanilla*, and plain-Janey, and goody-goody, and like the kinda girl who just skated on the surface of life and wouldn’t even admit there was a world below the ice. I mean, granted, the last time I saw her was years ago, but, who knows, man, maybe that’s just me. I don’t really believe people change that much. Anyway, it sounded like she turned into a punk, right? She treated you like shit. *That’s* what I’m saying. I was shocked to read your side of it.”

“Yeah, well . . .” I didn’t really have much else to say to all that and so nodded silently for a while and sipped my drink. I knew she was siding with me, and that she’d intended to make me feel better, and everything she’d said about Lily was equally hard to argue against and hard to stomach. True: The flavor of Lily’s public persona, especially compared to Hannah’s fudge-covered spumoni, was vanilla. Also true: she’d treated me like shit. But here’s the thing: I’d been intensely drawn to and in love with Vanilla Lily, and perhaps even more so *after* she’d started treating me like shit, and then *even* more so after she’d left me for Brad. Even though Hannah hadn’t meant to, everything she said seemed to reflect poorly on *me*, not Lily. But what was I gonna do? Say that? Change the subject? Or ask for more?

“So,” I said, “whatcha think about her response to your letter?”

“The *it’s always complicated* stuff?” she said. “Dumb, right? I mean, duh. And that *I hear ya, sista, girl power* shit. C’mon. I was like ‘This bitch still stuck on the Spice Girls or what?’ Oh, and the *bliss* stuff. Holy shit! She straight up ripped that from you, didn’t she?”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “You think it’s corny, don’t you?”

“The Bliss List? Y’know, it makes sense, knowing your dad and all. He’s a funny guy no doubt, silly but serious, one of the cooler parents I know for sure.”

Hannah was not, as I suspected, preventing me from attributing her forthcoming criticism of my dad’s Bliss List stuff to my dad as person. She was searching for an astute way to parry the question altogether. She asked me:

“You ever read Rachel’s Bliss List?”



"Of course," I said. "I was a wily little shit, with a killer knack for snooping. I crushed it."

"Past tense *crushed it*?" Hannah raised her right eyebrow; then added: "Still crushin' it, I'd say."

"How so?" I asked.

"Didn't take you long to figure out I was Prudence," she said. "If I needed a PI, I'd hire you."

"Well, Ms.—Silverstein was it?"

"Banana," she said. "Hannah Banana."

"Ms. Banana," I said, elated that we'd begun to drift away from anything related to Lily and finally begun to ease our way toward playful seduction, "I'd be honored to work your case."

Hannah and I had been sitting opposite each other this entire time. Our feet had touched once or twice, but only by accident, and neither one of us had seized the opportunity to start a game of footsie. Now Hannah came over to my side of the hot tub, sat to my right, put her arm around me, and said:

"I know magicians aren't supposed to reveal their secrets, but I'm just *dying* to know how you did it."

Judgment clouded by flattery and flirtation, I said, "Well, you know what they say: a PI's only as good as his informants," and then, because Lily had told me so many times that it was "creepy" the way I "stared" at her when we made out, made sure to close my eyes before leaning in for a kiss, which at first, struggling to plant

my lips on Hannah's, seemed like a tactical error on my part, but then, cracking my eyes open just enough to reorient my navigation, I noticed, much to my confusion and disappointment, that Hannah had not only averted her lips but yanked her head as far back as her neck would take it. That she didn't want to kiss me was crystal clear, but why she didn't, I hadn't a clue.

"So that's it," she said. "No wonder."

Still, no idea what was going on.

"That treacherous little bitch," she said.

"Who?" I said.

"Secret's out," she said.

"What secret?" I said, feeling more confused and anxious with each passing second. "Was there even a secret?"

Suddenly wide-eyed, as if my not getting it, or else the secret that—whatever it was—I'd unwittingly revealed, had triggered an epiphany, Hannah shot up, splashing salt water in my eyes and mouth. Then she swung her legs over the edge of the tub, hopped down and hightailed it to the kitchen—buck naked; she didn't even think to grab her clothes on her way in.

Adrenalized by the chaotic day, I hadn't even thought about eating, let alone hydrating myself, not counting the handful of water I'd taken with my morning pills; then I'd ridden my bike four and a half miles to Ms. Humphry's, walked Gus to the dog park, attempted to play fetch with him, taught a strange widower how to access his photo album in the iCloud, conversed with him about death, grief, and online

dating, tried my best to assure him he wasn't to blame for his chocolate lab's shit-eating habit, bolted back to Ms. Humphry's, pedaled at full tilt to the store and then again at full tilt back to Ms. Humphry's, by which point I'd exerted so much physical energy as to make my heart rate shoot up as alarmingly high as the time when, just a little under a year earlier, a buddy of mine, having got all his black-market pharmaceuticals mixed up, accidentally fed me 40 milligrams of amphetamine salts in place of the 10 milligrams of hydrocodone I'd asked for. Then, to put an even greater strain on my recently neglected cardiovascular system (before my split with Lily, I'd go on forty-five minute jogs four or five times weekly), I'd smoked that lung-scalding, nicotine-rich, filterless (not to mention unsolicited) cigarette Hannah had placed between my lips, scrambled around the house trying to find a way inside, panicked about giving Gus his pills and Ms. Humphry a reason to fire me and Hannah proof I wasn't worth her time. I should've known better, should've sat down on one of Ms. Humphry's wicker deck chairs and taken a moment to get my breathing under control, but every decision involved in those seemingly trivial moments had coincided with every decision involved in those seemingly crucial interactions taking place between Hannah and me, which interactions, in addition to inducing yet further heart-pounding anxiety, had greatly impaired my judgment. So, trying to play it cool, I'd heaved Hannah up to the roof, eaten two spoonfuls of raw, weed-butter fortified cookie dough, drunk—quickly, nervously—two potent cocktails, soaked in the hot tub, had a conversation followed by a seduction slip-up that only the bionic heart of a sociopath or fighter pilot or politician could've

endured without running the risk of cardiac arrest, and then, like a fucking moron, made the mistake of springing to my feet, climbing out the tub, and bounding—way, way, way too fast—toward Ms. Humphry’s kitchen in search of Hannah.

The world went dark, the house turned upside down; the back door disappeared, and my clothes—I didn’t even realize I was naked—did too. Then came the floaters, some bluish-green and freakishly large, shaped like pinecones with sawtooth outlines, golden rays shooting every which way, tiny specks with flaring, comet-like tails and others with squiggly, slithering spermatozoa-like tails. I staggered around, sloshing through puddles of lukewarm salt water and groping the wall in search of the door; and when I finally located the doorframe, trying to feel my way to the knob, I found nothing but a gape, which brought to mind that horrifying scene in *Beetlejuice* in which Alec Baldwin steps through the back door of his house and falls into a vast desert of rolling dunes, where, panic-stricken, he’s stalked by an enormous white-and-black-striped sandworm.

Once I realized Hannah had left the door open and the only creature awaiting me on the other side of the threshold was Gus, I took a cautious step forward, then another, and another, and then, floaters now rapidly diminishing in size and number, dizziness and nausea subsiding, managed to paw my way into the kitchen, yelling out, “Yo, Hannah, you good? Where you at? What’s up?” but she didn’t respond, although I knew she must’ve heard me because just then, even though I could just barely make out her silhouette faintly backlit by the front-porch light slipping

through the stained-glass transom window atop the front door, I spotted her scurrying toward the stairs. Maybe she hadn't heard me, or decided to ignore me.

Then the stairs creaked overhead, dog tags clinked behind me, along with the not-easily identifiable sound of something like a horse brushing its tongue over a salt lick, or a cat struggling to dislodge peanut butter from the ridged roof of its mouth. "Gus, whatcha got? Drop it! Drop it! I said, *drop it!*" Buck naked, dripping water all over the hardwood floor, I dropped to my knees and drove an index finger into Gus's mouth, just as the old man at the park had done to his lab.

"Here." Hannah, back now, handed me a towel, picked up the bowl she'd mixed the dough in and held it in front of my face. "Empty," she said. "We probably need to pump his stomach or something."

"I don't know anything about that," I said. "D'you?"

"C'mon, man, you worked at a pet store."

"Yeah, so?" I said. "You don't need paramedical certification to work at Come & Pet It. The fuck do I know?"

"That's what I'm asking, man. *What the fuck do you know?*"

"You can't overdose on weed, I know that. You know that too. We used to blow smoke in Jerome's face all the time and he loved it."

"Relax, all right. I'll call the vet."

"*The* vet. What vet? What vet's open this late on a *Sunday*."

I might've known no doggie emetic recipe, but it wasn't like I'd left Come & Pet It with no more than a few operating theories on canine coprophagia.

Straightening my back, holding out my hand, and modulating my voice so as to replace my tense shrill with self-possessed calm, as if impersonating a neurosurgeon requesting forceps, I said:

“Phone, please.”

Hannah grabbed Ms. Humphry’s cordless from its base fixed to the narrow wall between the cupboards and the dining room.

“I meant *my* phone,” I said.

“What difference does it make? Dial, dude, dial.”

Apparently my posturing hadn’t achieved the authoritative effect desired. We were in our twenties. A few extra years of living meant much more back then than it would a decade later, or a decade after that, when it’d matter even less, and on and on until everyone eventually entered one of three categories: old enough to be your parent, young enough to be your child, or everyone else in between. Hannah was older, wiser, more experienced than I was; and in stark contrast to the aimless, confused, lost-soul image she’d projected in her Pro-Sex Prudence letter, in person she was obviously far more comfortable in her own skin, self-oblivious, and uninhibited than I was. Whether she’d used the five years she had on me intentionally shaping herself into the seemingly real, genuine, unaffected person before me or misused those years to round out what would’ve otherwise been a most convincing persona, I didn’t know. Either way—authentic or inauthentic—her self-confident, forceful demeanor caused me to shed my contrivances, truckle to her, and called the Belmont Emergency Animal Clinic.

The phone rang three times before a deep-voiced veterinary nurse answered.

“Good evening,” I said. “So, my dog got into some chocolate chip cookie dough, right? and I was wondering if—”

So sure was he about what I was struggling to say, so impatient was he with my hemming and hawing, that the vet nurse cut me off, blurting “If marijuana is toxic to dogs?”

“How’d you—”

Then he did it again—wouldn’t let me finish so much as a simple question. “Because,” he said, “we . . .,” and then paused. And because the juncture at which he’d decided to pause was not only awkward but inordinately long, I figured we’d been disconnected. But no; he came back and injected so much superiority and arrogance into “get this call—*all—the—time*” that it became clear what his deal was: he was just another Portland 80’s baby who’d gotten it into his rain-saturated brain that dedicating himself to a specialized, well-meaning career with some greater-good cause attached to it would—and should—protect him against encountering people, like me, who didn’t know everything he knew and therefore didn’t deserve his respect and tolerance. It was easy for me to spot his type; I’d harbored the same attitude toward clueless customers at Come & Pet It; and there was a good chance, I figured, that just as I’d hated it when customers wasted my time, so did he hate it that (he *felt*) I was wasting his. I could see him there, wearing his dorky headset, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. I could feel him resenting me. I could even imagine that when he’d decided to invest his time and money and energy in

acquiring his Certificate of Veterinary Nursing, he'd probably envisioned bigger and better things for himself than working the desk-manager evening shift at the B.E.A.C., regurgitating night after dismal night questions and answers to absentminded, pot-head pet owners and pet sitters alike.

"Larry!" Hannah filliped the back of my hand, striking my middle knuckle. "You're in la-la land, man. Snap to. Ask him what the deal is."

I was so cold all of a sudden that I had trouble taking in a deep breath, and so I thrust the phone into Hannah's hand and headed to the back porch for my clothes, which were soaked, and then shuffled back inside in time to catch some of Hannah's answers to Vet Nurse's questions:

"Like forty pounds give or take" . . . "Twenty minutes ago, *max*" . . . "Off-brand ones, a whole bag of 'em."

I inched up to Hannah and put my head next to the phone so as to hear what Vet Nurse had to say. Looking annoyed, Hannah backed up and put the phone on speaker. Unalarmed, or just blasé—who knew?—Vet Nurse said:

"A forty-pound dog should be able to handle that much weed. If he vomits, it's because of the chocolate, but that's nothing to worry about. He'll be high for two to three days. Needless to say, he'll be abnormally hungry and thirsty. Let him drink as much water as he wants; you don't want him to get dehydrated. But don't overfeed him; food will only keep it in his system longer. Now, if he shows signs of having a panic attack—increased heart rate, burrowing his head in the couch, having a seizure, anything like that—you'll need to take him to a vet. ASAP."



“What if he’s on meds?”

“Well, what meds?”

“Hold on one sec.” Hannah grabbed the Ball jar, put it up to her face, read the number aloud.

After a few seconds of silence, he said, “Oh, that’s wonderful. Maribital. Synthetic THC.”

“Since when do they prescribe weed pills to animals?” Hannah said.

“They don’t,” Vet Nurse said. “What’s the owner’s full name and contact information?”

“You won’t be able to reach her,” I said. “She’s out of town.”

“I’m obligated to report this to Animal Services,” he said.

“*Why?*” Hannah was incredulous.

“Giving dogs medication prescribed to humans is animal abuse,” he said. “I’m only required to report this to Animal Services. It’ll be their decision whether or not to file a pharmaceutical drug abuse report with the Center for Disease Control. So, the owner’s information . . . .”

“All right, fine.” Hannah’s voice turned sullen, as if conceding defeat. “Got a pen?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Great,” Hannah said. “Ready?”

“Yes, I’m ready.”

“Got the cap off and everything?”

"Please," he said, clearly incapable of hiding his exasperation, "just give me the information."

"So, to be clear," Hannah said, "you've got a pen. And you're one hundred percent sure the cap is off?"

"Yes and yes."

"So it's all ready to go, is what you're saying."

"YES. For the love of god, *yes yes yes*."

"OK, good," Hannah said, "now take that pen, shove it up your grimy twat, and suck my hairy-ass nuts, you doofy shit-wad cum bucket." Then she hung up, scoffed, rolled her eyes (no tongue), looked at me, and said, "You good? You're shivering."

"I'm cold," I said.

"It's like seventy-five degrees in here."

"I'm wet."

"Dry off and put your clothes back on."

"They're soaked."

"Then put 'em in the drier."

"Yeah, all right," I said, and returned to the back porch, which was awash with salt water. Before I reached my clothes, I spotted Gus's nub of a tail jutting out between the right side of the hot tub and the railing, which alarmed me; I worried he was there searching for a dark and quiet place to sequester himself while suffering through the throes of a panic attack. But then I saw he wasn't convulsing or hiding

but lapping up the pool of water that'd collected in the trough-like crevice between the underside of the hot-tub cover and the thermal flap extending some three inches past its base. "Gus, *no!* Stop. *Get over here!*" I yelled at him, but he was not his normal, obedient self; he just looked at me over his shoulder and then, clearly desperate to relieve a bad case of cotton mouth, went back to drinking—*salt* water. Which was *not* going to help.

I stooped forward, grabbed his collar, and dragged him inside.

Entering the kitchen I saw first the open Ball jar atop the counter and second Hannah popping something into her mouth, which she then washed down with a swig of straight white rum.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"What does it look like? The cookies are burnt, remember? What are *you* doing? Where your clothes at?"

"He was drinking the water from the tub."

"So?"

"It's salty," I said. "It's gonna dehydrate him."

"Why so concerned all of a sudden? Cum Bucket said he'd be fine—you heard him."

Voice stern, I said, "*Before* he knew he'd already taken a bunch of weed pills."

My heart felt like one of those paint-shaking machines at Sherwin-Williams, and my arms, legs, and fingers convulsed like my buddy Brendan's had that time in middle school when an episode of *Pokémon* caused him to have epileptic fit; the only

thing I wanted was to curl up and burrow my face between two pillows; and so with Gus's collar in one hand and both my phone and the towel around my waist in the other, I told Hannah I was gonna go to take a hot shower, shuffled through the entranceway, trudged up the stairs, and entered the bathroom, where I locked the door behind me, set Gus free, placed my phone on the counter, and checked the medicine cabinet, not in hopes of finding narcotics or anything like that but in hopes that among Ms. Humphry's assortment of creams, ointments, and dental-hygiene products I'd find a label with a list of warnings or instructions so long and detailed as to keep my attention while I tried to regain my composure; but all I came across were a ziplock bag of cotton swabs; a tube of all-natural, fennel-flavored toothpaste; a behemoth, thousand-count bottle of extra-strength acetaminophen; and, strewn about the bottom shelf, some fifteen of those poorly designed plastic floss toothpick things, the pick ends of which are too thick and the floss ends of which are too flimsy for the purpose of any serious food excavation. I then shut the mirrored door, went to the shower, bent over and turned on the hot water. I was still cold and wet and salty—although I wasn't sure whether the saltiness was from the hot tub or my sweat—and I really did want to take a hot shower, but what if I passed out and on my way down clipped my chin on the tub spout and bit the tip of my tongue off? Or, worse, gouged my eye on the diverter knob? Or, worse still, nicked my wrist on the sharp end of the tear-drop-shaped handle and bled to death? If Hannah found me like that, what would she do? What would she tell my parents? Wouldn't that look like a suicide? But because realistic imaginings cropped up in my mind as well—

Hannah putting her ear to the door, hearing nothing, and wondering why, after telling her I was going to take a shower, I'd locked Gus and myself in the bathroom—I decided to let the shower run and then plopped down cross-legged on the gray rug so contoured as to hug the base of the toilet in case I needed to throw up. But as the hot water pelted the back of the claw-footed tub, steam billowed over its clear-plastic curtains and hung in the air like low-lying cloud coverage, creating a rain-forest atmosphere that might've seemed pleasant and soothing any other time, but in my agitated and paranoid state bore an unsettling resemblance to those horrifying chase scenes through the Guatemalan jungle in *Apocalypto*, with marauding jaguars and Mayan tribesmen brandishing stone-arrowhead spears jumping out of trees and from behind banana plants. I would've stood up or maybe even crawled over to the shower to turn it off had my heart palpitations and chest constrictions not been as severe as they'd become, had my sudden waves of nausea and cold sweats less overwhelming and bizarre than they were (sweats had begun exuding through pores on parts of my body where I didn't even know sweat glands existed: the nape of my neck, the crooks of my elbows and knees). I was worried, but not as worried as I was the first time this had happened to me.

A little over half a year earlier, right around the time when, short of my immediate family, I started to lose everything that made me feel centered—the job I didn't like but paid my bills, the journalism degree I wasn't sure what I'd do with but knew would diminish my résumé's pitiable paucity of education and work experience, and, of course, the girlfriend I was in love with but knew had fallen out

of love with me—and I’d begun to realize that, regardless of how much effort I put forth, I couldn’t do anything about it. I’d reached that point where I needed to accept my losses and figure out a way to understand how I was reacting to them so that I could put them behind me and start over. But I didn’t want to alarm my parents and sister and I didn’t want to give Lily any reason to think I was becoming emotionally weaker while she was becoming emotionally stronger and I didn’t want to take my disclosures to a male friend who’d just perceive them as invitations to talk about himself and I didn’t want to seek professional help from a doctor who I was sure would diagnose me with some physical disorder or mental disorder or both and impose on me a step-by-step plan *to getting better* that of course would include divulging to my *loved ones* what my disorder was and what I was doing about it and what they could do to help—I didn’t want to do that, any of that; I didn’t want to make them responsible for my problems, which would cause them to pussyfoot around me and cast me half-concerned and half-pitying sidelong glances and say things like “You sure that’s a good idea?” and “What does your doctor say about that?” whenever I cracked a beer or smoked a cigarette or took a bong hit or just seemed *off* in any way in their presence (I used to puke in my mouth a little just thinking about it). In other words, I didn’t want to face the truth and reach out to a trustworthy confidant or a licensed specialist; and, as you now know, I’d invented all sorts of justifications both selfish and selfless to postpone doing so. So what did I do about it? Exactly what any prideful, deluded, self-protective Generation Xer or Millennial suffering from any affliction would’ve done.

I Googled it.

Or, to be precise, I entered my symptoms sans punctuation in the website address bar (which was as good as Googling it; the computer knew what I meant); and the first link that appeared—after a long list of advertisements for nearby psychiatrists and relevant pharmaceutical drugs disguised as websites—was to WebMd’s Panic Disorder page. My symptoms matched, damn near verbatim, those listed in the disorder’s description; but this was WebMd, not a real-life doctor; whatever it said I could take or leave, no problem.

But once you start clicking it’s hard to stop.

Before long I’d landed on an Anxiety Disorder Discussion Forum, where I’d then stumbled on MantraGuru007’s advice to HelpMe1982’s—“Whenever you feel a panic attack coming on, slow your breathing down and repeat a relaxing mantra to yourself until it passes”—which seemed so asinine, so obvious, so pathetic—*what mantra? for how long? and if that doesn’t work, then what?*—and I remember that while reading it I was also watching myself read it. But the one watching was not anything like my spiritual essence levitating overhead, making keen observations that would later become serviceable insights designed to steer me away from folly and toward what *really mattered* in life; rather it was my plain and ordinary and earthly self, hunched over, arms crossed, head shaking, pointer finger wagging, standing in the corner of the room and staring at my *other* plain and ordinary self lying on the bed, in the dark, alone, door locked behind me, laptop resting on my chest, as if instead of conducting self-improvement research I were indulging in

prurient warm-up site surfing. But clearly, from Leering Me's perspective, watching my bloodshot eyes pore over those dot coms my journalism professors had repeatedly and unequivocally instructed me never to trust, I was up to no good, and the strangest thing about it was that it made me feel embarrassed, so much so that all at once I cleared my browsing history, closed my laptop, assured Leering Me in the corner there not to worry, I was just satisfying a curiosity, that's all, I'll never stoop that low, I promise, I swear, never *ever*.

And yet there I was in Ms. Humphry's bathroom, with my eyes closed, my clammy palms on my sticky chest, rocking back and forth and repeating to myself like a davening yeshiva student who'd turned his back on the Torah in favor of an illiterate Internet forum, "This is not real, it's in your head, this is not real, it's in your head," over and over, for a solid two minutes, at least; then I lost focus and my attention shifted to my cottony throat and mouth, and in an attempt to speed up the composure-regaining process I created an abbreviated version—"Not real, in head, not real, in head, not real, in head"—which I was able to keep up for thirty seconds or so before getting so frustrated with the lack of results that I gave up, and when I opened my eyes I saw Gus sitting right there before me, panting laboriously as though he'd been marooned on a desert plateau baking under the sun for days, and staring at me through the pale-yellow rheum in his eyes.

To kill time at Come & Pet It my coworkers and I used to play a game we called "There's Two Kinds of People in the World, Which Are You?" and I remember this one time Billy T the reptile enthusiast came up with "those who crap and wank



in front of their pets and those who don't," which I'd taken to mean "those who feel self-conscious in front of animals and those who don't." I belonged to the former group.

I told Gus to back up, stop judging, and mind his own business, and when he stayed put, staring and panting, I made the mistake of believing he fully comprehended not only my words but the entire situation, as if he were not a dog I was looking after but a clever, devious kid I was babysitting who realized the moment I put him in harm's way and nearly sicced the authorities on his mother that he had enough blackmail-worthy dirt on me to disobey me with impunity, and because he lacked the ability to articulate his thought in English he had to resort to getting in my face and barking. But because he was at least as baked as I was, mouth at least as parched as mine was, he couldn't bark properly. Nonetheless, I interpreted his rasping and heaving as canine-speak for *Whatcha gonna do about it, Larry?* To which I responded, "Gus, c'mon, it's not like I wanted any of this to happen." Again he rasped and heaved (*Well good for you, Larry.*), and I replied, "Please believe me, Gus." Another airy heave left his mouth (*Go fuck yourself, Larry*). "Gus," I said, trying to remain calm and reasonable, "you're not your normal self right now. That's the cookie dough talking. Seriously, c'mon, let's work together on this." This time he opened his mouth so wide as to bare all his teeth; then rose on all fours and lunged at me. Expecting him to sink his fangs into my eyes I flinched and hid my face in the crook of my right elbow. I heard a thick gurgle, like bubbles surfacing in tar pit. I peeked over my forearm and saw a liquid as white and frothy

as shoreline spume cascading down Gus's tongue and into my lap, where it collected in the little hammock-like space made by the towel suspended between my thighs (*You're not listening to what I'm saying, Larry. I'm sick, you idiot. Sick.*) "Serves you right," I said, and lurched to my feet, spilling the pool of spume onto the white-and-black checkered tiles. "Nobody told you to eat that, Gus." I opened the door and nudged his rear hard enough to make him take one step forward; he jibbed at the threshold and cast me a sorrowful, sleepy-eyed glance. I hooked two fingers under his collar and pulled him into the hallway. He wobbled down the stairs. I shut the door, stripped the soiled towel off my waist, and just before dropping it noticed that the puddle of puke on the ground had taken the shape of a human arm flexing, which the kind of person who'd do such a thing would've snapped a photo of and then posted on Instagram. I wasn't that kind of person, though, and even if I had been—well, even though I was relieved Gus had purged some of the salt water and cookie dough from his system, I was still so racked with apprehension that no fucking way in hell would taking a picture have occurred to me in that moment. (In fact, I even question whether I actually noticed that arm then or am noticing for the first time, right now, in my mind's eye, as I recall everything that happened that night.) At any rate, I was racked with apprehension. What would happen if Gus's purge made no difference, if he had a seizure later in the night, if his heart started pounding like mine, if he burrowed his head in the couch or in the corner of the room, if I had to take him to the Belmont Emergency Animal Clinic, if Vet Nurse were still on duty and so pissed off about being called a shit-wad cum bucket that he

wouldn't entertain any story I might invent by then to exonerate Ms. Humphry, if I were forced to disclose Ms. Humphry's information, if Ms. Humphry chose not only to keep the three hundred dollars (which I desperately needed) she said she'd pay me when she came back but made me pay the Belmont Emergency Animal Clinic bill and whatever legal fees she might incur fighting Animal Services and/or the Center for Disease Control, should it come to that? And running alongside that train of anxiety-inducing thoughts was another, miles long, shipping loads of annoyance with Gus for using me as a toilet; and no sooner had those trains passed then another carrying short-fuse verbal bombs, defective grenades, primed to send shrapnel-like invectives every which way, sure to cause all sorts of undesired collateral damage.

It was while I was buck naked and down on all fours and facing the wall opposite the door (thereby placing me in the compromising position I'm sure you can imagine) and wiping up Gus's mess that Hannah entered the bathroom, and because the running shower had drowned out the sound of the doorknob, I didn't even realize she was standing there till I felt Gus's wet nose wedged between my ass cheeks, sniffing me as though I were dog, and I blenched, shrieked, and turned my head to see what the fuck was going on, which startled Hannah and made her recoil and let out a horror-struck shriek of her own, which in turn made me shriek again.

"Jesus fuck, Larry," Hannah said, "you scared the shit out me."

I was too embarrassed and caught of guard to think before speaking; instead of taking a deep breath, apologizing, and telling her what was going on, I reflexively rebuked her:

“Why'n't you fuckin' knock, man?”

“Jesus, Larry, I just—”

“The fuck is wrong with you? I’m in the *bathroom*. Seriously, what the fuck?”

“All right all right, I’m sorry, Jesus, what’s wrong with you?” Hannah stepped out into the hallway and shut the door. “I heard the shower running. I just wanted to let Gus back in.”

“Why?”

“Someone’s gotta watch him.”

“No, I mean, where you going?”

“Home. I work early.” She paused, and then said, “What are you doing in there?”

“Cleaning up puke. What’d it look like?”

“You sick?” Her tone was inflected with disbelief and condescension. “We had *two* drinks.”

“Not *my* puke,” I said, “Gus’s puke.” I grabbed a towel from the wicker basket atop the toilet’s reservoir and covered myself.

“You need anything,” she said, “before I go?”

“You mad at me?” I asked, still feeling too hideous and mortified to show my face. She didn’t answer, and so I said, “Hannah?”

“We’ll talk later.” Her voice was quieter; she was no longer just outside the bathroom but, I imagined, at the top of the stairs, her right hand on the railing, her left foot lowering onto the first step. Or maybe that’s just the way I imagine it now, my memory of that moment having since been reconstructed so as to fit the moment that directly followed it, the moment I heard her choosing not to answer my question, the soles of her shoes padding down the carpeted steps, and the front door’s hinges screeching as she let herself out.

I left the bathroom, bolted to the streetward-facing guest room, and looked out the window. The clouds had thinned and the moon shone down on her. I watched her take about ten quick, long strides along the sidewalk. Then she halted, turned around, and gazed back at the house. It’s possible all she was doing was trying to decide whether at that hour she should head north to catch the 24-Freemont bus or head south and walk home, but I didn’t want to believe that after everything that’d happened in the past twenty-four hours and, especially, what’d just happened in the past hour or so, she could limit her thoughts to such a simple and practical either/or decision. I wanted to think that the decision she was trying to make—if indeed making some decision or other at all was on her mind—involved either coming back to Ms. Humphry’s so as not to leave on such a strange and confusing and contentious note or going home so as to avoid making matters worse by trying to talk through the nutty bullshit that just gone down. I wanted to think that her decision was fraught with complicated, contradicting feelings, that those feelings included on the one hand humiliation and pain and anger and maybe even

some panic akin to what I was experiencing—feelings that might compel her to follow her impulse to flee—and, on the other hand, the obligation she was under to help me take care of Gus who had eaten *her* cookie dough, guilt about sending me the invitation to make a move in the hot tub and then averting her lips when I did, and sympathy for the way she could probably imagine the bait-and-switch had hurt me—feelings that might compel her to reverse her decision to cut and run the way she had; and it'd be a blatant lie if I said I didn't want, above all else, for this second set of imagined feelings of hers to hold the most sway over her decision. Standing at the window waiting to see what she'd do next, I found myself whispering "c'mon, come back, please, please, *please*—just come back," and when she didn't—when she gave a resolute nod to herself and then set off northward, disappearing behind the overgrown cherry laurels hedging Ms. Humphry's neighbor's yard—I neither pushed the window open to yell those words nor run after her.

Instead I went back to the bathroom to finish taking care of Gus's mess. I went downstairs to clean the kitchen. I went to the back porch to retrieve the glasses we'd left out there and to put the lid back on the hot tub. I went upstairs again and rifled through Ms. Humphry's closet and bureau, certain I'd find an ex's ratty T-shirt, or, preferably (I still had the chills), a well-worn sweat suit bearing a cracked and faded alma mater's logo that she'd appropriated for her pajamas collection, but I found nothing of the sort, and so stood there a moment in a daze, wondering if Ms. Humphry was too sensitive to the negative memories associated with such relics of failed romance to keep them around, and then, snapping out of it

and remembering what I was doing there, chose to sport Ms. Humphry's teal silk bathrobe, the only thing I thought would fit me, while my wet clothes and her befouled towels were in the washing machine. I also washed the dishes, deleted Belmont Emergency Animal Clinic's number from her digital cordless phone, put the liquor bottles back in the cabinet the way I'd remembered finding them, took out the trash and recycling, helped myself to a box of spaghetti, which, after liberally buttering and salting, I scarfed down too fast, as if I'd been subsisting on potato skins in a labor camp for the past year, thereby nauseating myself and making me break out in a cold sweat again. Once the nausea and cold sweats subsided, though, I felt good enough to get back to work. In the basement, I put the laundry in the drier. In the living room, I lay down on the rug next to Gus. In order to assure myself he was doing all right, I rested my head on his chest and listened to his heart and breathing. He was out cold—didn't even notice I was there—but otherwise seemed OK.

Head propped against Gus's back, I sent Hannah a couple of texts—

ME

You get home safe?

Tonight was really weird.

Not sure what else to say...

—waited five minutes, received no response, sent a few more—

You're probably asleep.

Yeah? No?

Hope I'm not waking you up.

—and planned to show some self-restraint and leave it at that. But cleaning Ms. Humphry's place, eating a bowl of pasta, and assuring myself Gus was going to be just fine had alleviated my anxiety and brought my heart rate down more effectively than any stupid mantra ever could, and so now, with my head more or less clear and my body warm and tingly from all that weed butter, I suddenly had so many thoughts running through my mind that I worried would obliterate my restored tranquility unless given vent to posthaste. And so I sent her just a few more texts, doing as best I could to limit myself to the need-to-know only—

I hate it when people use this as an excuse, but . . .

I was really fucked up tonight.

Hadn't eaten all day.

Wasn't myself.

Said some things I shouldn't have.

I'm sorry I snapped at you.

Really really really sorry.



You didn't deserve that.

All right. That's all.

Have a nice day at work tomorrow.

P.S. Give a brother a chance to make it up to you?

—and then conked out.